

THE BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR.

EZRA.

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OR,

ANECDOTES, SIMILES, EMBLEMS, ILLUSTRATIONS, EXPOSITORY,
SCIENTIFIC, GEOGRAPHICAL, HISTORICAL, AND HOMILETIC,
GATHERED FROM A WIDE RANGE OF HOME AND
FOREIGN LITERATURE, ON THE VERSES
OF THE BIBLE.

BY

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EZRA.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF EZRA.

THAT the Book of Ezra is a continuation of the Books of Chronicles is evident from the fact that the last verses of "Chronicles" are repeated as the first verses of Ezra. There is also the most marked similarity in the literary style and method.

THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE BOOK.—There is no reasonable ground for denying that Ezra was the author of the book that now bears his name. But the admission must be made that the present form of the work may be due to the editorial labours of the Great Synagogue in the early days of the Grecian ascendancy. It is quite possible that Ezra was rather a collector than an organiser, and that what he left at his death was rather a mass of material than a completely edited history. These materials may have come into the hands of a later editor, who had the historical genius, and he has put them into the shape with which we are familiar, making necessary editorial corrections and editions.

DATE OF THE BOOK.—There seems to be some uncertainty as to whether the Jewish literary "renaissance" is to be dated the time of Ezra or between one and two centuries later, when the nation felt the inspiration of contact with Greek culture. We should have no doubt about its identification with the later period, but we must be willing to admit that the revived literary interest, and the new standards, must have materially influenced the re-editing of the ancient Scripture records.

AN UNFINISHED FRAGMENT.—The Book of Ezra, as it stands, is an evidently unfinished fragment; and some would find the natural continuation in Nehemiah, chap. viii. The object of the compiler is evidently the same as that which gives character and tone to the Books of Chronicles. The mission upon which Ezra's whole heart was set was the full re-establishment of the old Mosaic ritual; the reassertion of the old Mosaic social laws; and the revival of religion of that formal type which is always dear to the heart of the priest.

THE PERSONALITY OF EZRA.—It may greatly help to a right understanding of the Book of Ezra if some effort is made to form a fair estimate of the personality of this scribe, and to notice how the circumstances of his age found a fitting sphere for the intense expression of his personality.

Ezra was a priest, with an unusually valuable pedigree, of which he would be sure to think much, and to make much. He was descended from Hilkiah, and traced his line back to Aaron. And he "magnified his office." How he had gained his position of influence at the Persian Court we do not know, but we may be sure that his residence at Babylon made him familiar with the Chaldee language, which he introduces in some portions of his work (see chaps. iv. 8; vi. 18; vii. 12-26). In the seventh year of the reign of Artaxerxes Longimanus, Ezra was granted a commission to lead a second body of Jews back to Jerusalem, to take upon himself the administration of public affairs, and to correct those social abuses which had arisen among the returned exiles, and of which serious news had reached Babylon. This commission Ezra carried out, but in the spirit of the priest rather than in the spirit of the statesman. He showed himself to be a ruler with a very narrow, one-sided, and exaggerated point of view. The reformation that he effected proved to be the beginning of mischiefs as serious as the evils which he so violently

rooted out. The healthy and lasting reformation always has its basis in some spiritual truth, either freshly revealed or quickened to the view of men by the vivid apprehension of some reformer. Ezra was strong on duty, but he had no revelation or inspiration of truth at the back of the demands he made. He forced men to do what he thought right, and men only await the relief of the "force" to turn back to their wrong again.

Ezra's first visit to Jerusalem was not prolonged. He returned a second time, apparently a short time after Nehemiah's appointment as governor, and he was able to render to him valuable assistance. Ezra's life-work appears to cover a period of about eighty years; but no account of the place or date of his death is given in Scripture. It is generally assigned to 432 or 431 B.C., but as Josephus says that he died a very old man, Rawlinson prefers the date 420-410 B.C. Traditions assign him a grave near Samara, after his return to dwell in Persia; and is said to have lived to be 120 years old.

G. Rawlinson says of Ezra: "He comes before us in so many capacities, and is revealed to us in such brief and hurried flashes, that we can with difficulty form any distinct conception of his personality. He was student, critic, linguist, antiquary, historian, teacher and preacher, judge, governor, reformer of a religious system, second founder of a political community. We cannot call him a person of brilliant genius, or of great originality; but yet we have to acknowledge in him one of the born leaders of men, one of those who have exercised on the world a vast influence, and an influence almost entirely good. . . . It may be true that his aims were 'narrow,' and his methods 'rigid.' But he achieved a great success. In temperament Ezra was passionate and emotional."

Dr. Geikie says: "Intensely earnest, he had the absolute confidence of a zealot in his own definitions of the requirements of the law. To enforce the Levitical holiness of Israel had become his one idea, and no Puritan was ever more energetic or stern in pressing his will on others as that of God."

Dr. W. B. Pope says: "There is no character in the Old Testament more perfect and complete than that of Ezra. We see him as a servant and as a master; as a student of the law, and as its administrator, as supreme in authority and as subordinate, in public and in private, uniformly and always the same devout, disinterested, patriotic lover of his people, and friend of God."

Dean Stanley says: "Ezra and Nehemiah (for in some respects they are inseparable) are the very impersonations of the impenetrable toughness and persistency which constituted them the reformers of their people. Reformers in the noblest sense of that word they were not."

AS TO THE CONTENTS OF THE BOOK OF EZRA, it may be noted that they are divided into two periods (a third period is treated by Nehemiah). The first period is anterior to the time of Ezra, and extends over twenty-three years, from the first return of the exiles in 538 B.C., up to the completion of the temple, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius, 515 B.C. The books of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah shed light on this period. The second period begins with the eighth chapter of Ezra, and extends to the close of the book.

One of the difficulties felt in dealing with the work of Ezra arises from the fact that some sections are written in the first person, and some in the third person. The most simple and natural explanation of this peculiarity may be found in the habit of Ezra, in inserting his extracts bodily, just as he found them.

Regarding Ezra and Nehemiah as one book, Dean Stanley writes: "In this one book is discoverable the agglomeration of four distinct elements; which is instructive as an undoubted instance of the composite structure shared by other books of the Old and New Testaments, where it is not so distinctly traceable. These component parts are as follows: *a.* The portions written by the chronicler—the same as the compiler of the Book of Chronicles (comp. Ezra i. 1, 2; 2 Chron. xxxvi. 22, 23)—Ezra i., iii.-vi.; Neh. xiii. 1-20. *b.* Ezra's own narrative, Ezra vii.-x. c. Nehemiah's own narrative, Neh. i.-vii. 5; viii.-xi. 2; xii. 27-xiii. 31. *d.* Archives; Ezra ii.; Neh. vii. 6-73; xi. 3-36. In the divisions *a.*, *b.*, *c.* it may be questioned whether Ezra vii. 1-26; x. 1-44; Neh. viii. i.-xi. 2; vii. 27-xiii. 3 (in which Ezra and Nehemiah are described in the third person) belong to another narrative interwoven by the chronicler who compiled the whole book."

As a general conclusion, it may be said that there is no sufficient reason for distrusting the uniform tradition that the materials of the book were provided by Ezra.

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CHAPTER I.

VERS. 1-11. Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord.—*The discipline of the captivity* :—The captivity is clearly represented as God's judgment upon His people for their sins, but it was a judgment so tempered with mercy that it brought them much of blessing in the way of spiritual development. Their trials became a means, in various ways, of spiritual discipline. Losing the temple with its solemn ritual they found that God was a spirit and could be worshipped anywhere; at Jerusalem they had been able to hear His voice in the holy ordinances, but now they were dependent upon the revealed Word; hence diligent attention was paid to the preservation and transcription of the sacred writings, a service which prepared the way for the arrangement, not long after, by Ezra of the Old Testament canon. All such good impulses helped to work out a gradual but sure deliverance from their old sin of idolatry. In Judea the service of idols had become strangely confused with the service of Jehovah. It was thought by many not so very wrong to worship images if at the same time they worshipped God. The evils which assail us now are different in form, but are working along the same line; we have other idols, but the same snare. Natural history has an interesting chapter called "Mimicries of Nature," the description of certain creatures which have, in a wonderful degree, the appearance of vegetable life and are able thereby to seize more surely upon their unsuspecting prey. It illustrates the peril that surrounds us on many sides in the moral world; evil takes the shape of good; pleasures that seem harmless hide the sting of death, &c. Through such subtle temptations among the Jews idolatry became almost universal. But when they came to Chaldea they saw idolatry in all its naked deformity; it was not confused with true worship, it stood alone. They saw how it denied and despised Jehovah, and it filled them with horror. If idolatry bore such fruit their course was clear; they would have nothing to do with it. Not likely there were some whose religion in Judea had not been very pronounced who in Chaldea were among the foremost champions of Jehovah. In any Christian community there are good citizens who take no sides in the conflict between Christianity and unbelief. But imagine one of them suddenly removed to a community where infidelity prevails, where Christian worship is prohibited, where the Bible is dishonoured, where the prevailing sentiment is that of defiant atheism—how long would it be before he would be found standing out resolutely among the friends of Christ? In a recent revival multitudes signed this simple covenant: "I am trying to live a Christian life, and am willing to be counted on that side." An impulse like this must have come to many of the Jews in Babylon. The contempt heaped upon their religion strengthened their constancy, and they refused to "sing the Lord's song in a strange land." It is not meant that their harps were kept silent through all those years; but they would never sing the songs of Zion for anybody's sport; they would die first. Their spirit recalls the drummer-boy in the Irish Rebellion of 1798 who, being ordered by some rebels who had captured him to play for their entertainment, laid his instrument on the ground and leaped into it, tearing the parchment to shreds, and exclaiming, "God forbid that the king's drum should be beaten for

rebels!" whereupon they spiked him to death. (*Sermons by Monday Club.*)

Returning from the captivity:—God rules. His throne is the centre of history. His sovereignty is the key of all the mysteries in providence and grace. We look behind and speak of history; before and speak of prophecy; but He looks neither behind nor before. Yesterday and to-morrow are alike to Him. One glance sweeps the whole horizon. Does it seem wonderful that Cyrus should have been called and commissioned two centuries before his birth? We forget that telling and foretelling are the same with God. The map of eternity and the universe has always been spread out before Him. I. THE CAPTIVITY. It was in the year 604 B.C. that Nebuchadnezzar reduced Jerusalem and returned with his first deportation of captives. The date is important because it furnishes the prime factor in all calculations respecting the deliverance from Babylon. The captivity was for an appointed time, seventy years. There was a special reason why it should be precisely seventy years. The Lord had required of Israel the observance of every seventh year as a season of Sabbatic rest; for a period of four hundred and ninety years this injunction had been practically ignored. Seventy Sabbatic years have been desecrated, seventy years of Babylonish chastisement shall expiate the sin. So true is retribution. "Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap." But the captivity was not mere retribution, it was discipline. Its purpose was not so much to punish as to reform. Bearing a filial relation to God, the chosen people experienced the children's portion of chastisement (Heb. xii. 6-11). The Jews had a mission. God had called them from among the nations to take charge of His oracles. Monotheism must be kept until Christ. For this Abram was chosen out of Ur of the Chaldees. However superior to other tribes and nations in many particulars, they had not been loyal to their trust. They needed chastening. God had no alternative but to inflict it. Hence the captivity. Nor was the discipline vain. It will be profitable to note some of the lessons which they learned in captivity.

1. They were cured of idolatry. They had previously been unable to resist the imposing rites and ceremonies of their pagan neighbours. Familiarity with the abominations of the Babylonish gods nauseated them. They longed for the living God, saying, "When shall we return and appear before God?"
2. They conceived a new devotion to the Lord's sanctuary. Its holy ordinances had once been a weariness; but now they were homesick for Zion. The institution of the synagogue is traced to this period.
3. They learned the value of the Scriptures (Neh. viii.)
4. The stock of Israel was culled and improved. Only the choicest and best joined the restoration.
5. They were greatly knit together during the captivity. "One touch of nature make the whole world kin." A common sorrow will erase the enmity of years. Pain is a mighty solvent. The Jews of to-day scattered abroad over the earth are a living witness to the unifying power of adversity.
6. The heart and intellect of the nation were broadened. This widening of vision is manifest in all their subsequent history. Thus it appears that the captivity was an essential part of the Divine plan.

II. THE PROCLAMATION OF CYRUS. This also was in pursuance of the Divine plan. The clock struck at precisely the right moment. Jerusalem was taken by Nebuchadnezzar in 604 B.C. The proclamation was issued 536 B.C., leaving time for the beginning of the second temple in May of the year 534 B.C. The intervening period was just seventy years. "Jehovah stirred up the spirit of Cyrus." How?

1. By the voice of His Spirit in the inner man.
2. Probably Daniel brought the matter to his attention. He may have read to him the prophecy of Jeremiah (Jer. xxix. 10) and the prophecies of Isaiah (Isa. xlv. 94-98, xlv. 1-4).
3. It may have shaped itself in his mind as a suggestion of policy.
4. Or possibly there was a religious motive. He was a monotheist. He may have received the message and commission from Jehovah as from his own Ormuzd.

III. THE RETURN TO JERUSALEM. It was a voluntary movement. None were compelled to go. All were encouraged. They set forth prayerful and hopeful. In the 126th Psalm we have one of the songs of this pilgrimage. (*D. J. Burrell, D.D.*)

The exile ended:—We may safely conclude from the events stated in this and the following chapters—I. THAT THE LONG EXILE OF THE JEWS HAD DONE ITS APPOINTED WORK. God sent them into captivity partly to punish and partly to purify them. They had now been sufficiently chastened and they had been cleansed from their iniquity.

1. We may argue from the fact of the Jews commending themselves so much as they did to Cyrus that their lives were estimable and honourable.
2. We know that after the captivity in Babylon they left idolatry behind them for ever. Trouble will sometimes teach us what nothing else will. The Church and the school may have failed to lead us into the kingdom

of Christ, but the sadness of orphanage or the loneliness of the first absence from home may lead us to find a refuge in "the God of all comfort," in the unfailing Friend of the human heart. II. THAT GOD ACTS WITH GENTLE POWER ON THE MINDS OF MEN. 1. On those of His own people. He "raised the spirit" of many of the Jews (ver. 5). He caused them to feel deeply how excellent a thing it would be to repeople the city of Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple of God. He kindled in their hearts the fires of patriotism and of piety. He lifted them up above unworthy and unmanly fears. He made them brave and strong. 2. On those outside the Church. He girded Cyrus though that king knew Him not (Isa. lxxv. 5). It was by His all-wise direction that Greece prepared her thought and her language, and Rome her highways for the gospel in "the fulness of time." Therefore—(1) Let us ask of God that He will inspire us in our time of need. We may have before us some difficult task at school, some trying ordeal to pass through, some new sphere to enter upon, and we may shrink from going forward, but if we ask of God He will "raise our spirit" and make us equal to the effort. (2) Let us intercede with God for others; they may appear to be quite outside all holy influences, but they are not without the reach of that mighty Hand that can enlighten the darkest mind and soften the hardest heart and renew the most obdurate and stubborn will. III. THAT AT THE CALL OF GOD WE SHOULD BE READY TO UNDERTAKE ARDUOUS OR DANGEROUS WORK. It was a long journey and a perilous one to Jerusalem. 1. It was uncertain what they would find when they reached the city of their fathers; no such tidings came to them as now come daily to our countrymen in England who are emigrating to America; they went forth not knowing what would await them. Moreover, they left behind them some home, kindred, occupation, property. Where God clearly calls us we need not be daunted by danger or by difficulty. He who summons us will clear the way, and will sustain us under every trial. IV. THAT THOSE WHO CANNOT RENDER THE GREATER ARE WELCOME TO OFFER THE SMALLER SERVICE. Of those who declined to return there would be some who might have gone but would not, either because they were too timid or because they had attachments which they were unwilling to break away from. Others there were that would have gone but could not, either because they were too aged or infirm, or because they had ties which they felt it would be wrong to sunder. Of the latter there were many who, as they could not do the best possible, did the best practical thing. They could not swell the number of the returning, but they could strengthen the hand of those who went (ver. 6). We may be unable to serve Christ by missionary or ministerial or evangelistic labours, but we can strengthen the hands and cheer the hearts of those who can. We can give them gold or silver or pence. We can speak the inspiring word. We can pray for them and let them know that we are praying. We can write to those who are absent or send them that which others have written. V. THAT WHEN WE OBEY THE VOICE OF OUR MASTER WE DO MORE THAN WE KNOW. The Jews who returned from Babylon no doubt believed that they were acting as patriots and were serving their country; but they could have had no conception of all that would grow out of their courageous conduct. We never know what will be the long and large result of a true and brave course. Carey did not foresee the fruits of his self-denying zeal, nor Wesley of his "more abundant labours," nor Livingstone of his travels and his lonely death. It is a cheering and inspiring thought that our present faithfulness may be a living seed from which a large harvest of blessing may spring. VI. THAT THERE IS A BETTER RESTORATION than that of precious vessels to the house of God. It was a kindly act of Cyrus (see vers. 7-11), and the Jews rejoiced greatly when they saw those ancient and hallowed vessels beneath the roof of the new temple which they built. But there is a deeper joy in heaven, and there well may be on earth, when a human heart that has been taken away from the service of Christ is brought back again and is included among the spiritual treasures of the kingdom of God. (*W. Clarkson, B.A.*) *The captivity of evil*:—Sin may be conceived of as an object, but also as a power—as something to which our actions are directed, but also as something from which our actions proceed. Sin is an internal principle, and he who "commits sin," who lives in it, obeys it in this sense—obeys it as a force. The whole and constant tendency and bias of the soul is a despotic rule. It is more than an external authority or verbal law. It has a more vigorous and relentless rule. It is more besetting; has a more constant presence and constraining power; it acts directly on the will; it controls and stimulates volition. That is a great bondage that overbears the will, which brings it against itself into subjection, which ignores and defies its active choice, but that is a greater

far which corrupts and perverts it. There is no slavery like that in which the very seat and source of freedom is held captive. It is the salt losing its savour; it is the light leading astray; it is the king and leader falling in battle. (A. J. Morris.) *The return from the captivity—an argument for Daniel's history of the Jews in Chaldea being true*:—The return of the Jews from the captivity of Babylon is not only a proof of the Divine authority of the Scriptures, considered as the accomplishment of a prophecy, but it is an additional proof of it in this light, that it affords a strong internal presumption that the history which Daniel gives of the manifestations of Divine power in Chaldea, during the residence of the Jews in that country, were true. That we may place this argument in a stronger light, let us consider the full importance of the measure which Cyrus now adopted, and of the benefit which he conferred upon the Jews. The practice of slavery among the ancient nations is well known. The slaves were, in that period, one great branch of property. The slaves cultivated the land, did the household business, exercised the necessary trades, and, in general, performed all that labour in which the mass of the people are now employed. The slaves, therefore, formed one great portion of private property, and of the national stock. The slaves arose chiefly, among ancient nations, from the captives taken in war. This was the great fund from which they were supplied, and constituted a very considerable branch of the profits which accrued to the conquerors in the ancient wars. They estimated the profits of the war, not more by the extent of territory which they gained than by the number of slaves whom they captured. From this view we will be enabled to conceive how very difficult it must have been in ancient times for men who were once reduced to slavery to regain their liberty. The interests of the State, as well as the rights and properties of individuals, were all against them. Where there were so many interests to be consulted, so many properties to be separated, and so many private rights to be resumed, we may conclude that the liberating of the slaves, among the ancient nations, must have been a very arduous State measure. This accounts perfectly for the difficulty which the Jewish nation found in their attempt to emigrate from Egypt. Private persons have sometimes given a slave his liberty as a reward for some distinguished service; but it was impossible, under the ancient manners, for any considerable body of men to be set free without some cause which was very extraordinary. In the edict of Cyrus, then, and the return of the Jews from Babylon, we have a very uncommon piece of history presented to us. That conqueror, among the other valuable property of the vanquished empire, found a whole nation of slaves. This, according to the ideas of these times, was an immense acquisition. It was, in fact, an immense property, the value of which, to a political prince like Cyrus, must have been fully known. Yet we find this politic and wise prince giving liberty at once to this whole nation, and sending them back, after seventy years' captivity, into their own country. It is this extraordinary circumstance which Isaiah describes, and of the value of which he appears fully sensible, when he says, in his prophecy of Cyrus, "He shall build My city, and he shall let go My captives, not for price nor reward." Nor was this a sudden resolution. It was not adopted in the moment of victory, nor meant to exhibit a momentary triumph over the vanquished. The Jews remained in the same state in which they had lived under the Chaldeans during one entire reign of the new empire. I say, then, that this transaction affords a strong proof of the credit in which the Jewish nation then were in Babylon, and that the history which Daniel gives of the manifestations of Divine power which were made, during that period, and by the agency of that nation, in the province of Chaldea, were true. The transaction proves itself. There are no data here necessary, but to believe that the nation of the Jews were in Babylon, and that they returned from it. Their return proves the history. It supposes all that is related, and cannot otherwise be accounted for. It is affirmed that, in this period, the God of the Hebrews was acknowledged throughout the extensive provinces of Chaldea and Persia. At last the body of the Jews, whom the people they lived with regarded as a sacred nation, obtain their liberty, and are restored to their country. This is the history which is presented to us by their own writers; and the actual return of the Jews from their captivity, and resettlement in their own country, in opposition to so many complicated rights, in opposition to so many great interests, and in opposition to the universal practice of mankind in that period, suppose this history, and are a full proof of its authenticity. (J. Mackenzie, D.D.) *The first year of Cyrus*:—After making himself master of Persia and building up an empire in Asia Minor and the north, Cyrus swept down on the plains of Chaldea and cap-

tured Babylon in the year B.C. 538. To the Jews this would be the first year of his reign, because it was the first year of his rule over them, just as the year A.D. 1603 is reckoned by Englishmen as the first year of James I., because the king of Scotland then inherited the English throne. (*Walter F. Adeney, M.A.*) *Cyrus*:—The valley of the Euphrates was the centre of three out of the five great empires of antiquity—the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian. In the eighth and seventh centuries before Christ the first of these was in its strength, and from its capital, Nineveh, dominated peoples and lands from the Persian Gulf on the south to the Euxine Sea on the north; from Palestine on the west to the Caspian on the east. But among the many subject cities and tribes there was one city and there was one tribe which with special impatience bore the yoke and with special vehemence sought to cast it off. The rival city was Babylon, some three hundred miles further south, situated on and watered by the Euphrates, as Nineveh was by the Tigris. In the province of Babylonia one caste or tribe, the Chaldeans, became distinguished for its energy and enterprise and gradually imprinted its character and its name upon the people of the whole province. But despite all efforts to throw off the yoke, the Assyrian grip held fast. Nineveh ruled Babylon; the Assyrian dominated the Chaldean. The rival tribe was that of the Medes, to the east and north of the province of which Nineveh was the centre. Closely allied with and kindred to the Medes was another tribe, destined through Cyrus to give a famous name to history—the Persians. As yet the more civilised Medes have the mastery, and the hardier warriors follow the standard of the Median king; but both perforce acknowledge the supremacy of the lord of Nineveh. Thus it was till nigh the close of the seventh century B.C. A common policy and hatred and the presence of two able leaders then brought Babylonians and Medes into a temporary alliance. The city of the south and the tribes of the east joined hands and forces. Nineveh was besieged and taken, and the Assyrian empire ended. Babylon now entered upon a brief but brilliant career. Hers is the “Golden Empire” of antiquity. Under Nebuchadnezzar she mounted to the very zenith of her greatness. Meanwhile the Median kingdom became consolidated; and still the Median supremacy over the Persians is unchallenged. But about 560 B.C. a youthful hero-prince named Cyrus summoned the archer horsemen of the clans to arms. A long and bloody struggle ensued; in the end, by the aid of the young commander's genius, the conquerors were conquered and the foundations laid of the mighty Persian Empire. Cyrus is one of the most benign figures of history. His name (from the sun, “the sunny one”) indicates his nature. When Xenophon sought a sovereign of sagacity and piety to sit as a model for his “ideal king” he found what he sought in Cyrus. On the downfall of the Medes, he conciliated the good-will of the vanquished by permitting one of their own race to be titular king, whilst the real power of both nations resided in himself. The nominal king reigns but Cyrus rules at Ecbatana. Powerful as he is, his position is one of even greater danger than power. An alliance of three out of the four Great Powers of the day is formed against him. The young lion awaits not the huntsman but prepares to spring. He selects as his first foe Croesus, the king of Lydia. He surprises and storms the city of Sardis, Croesus is taken prisoner, and the Lydian dominion is ended. The Greek cities that fringe the coast of Asia Minor next feel his power and acknowledge his sway. Then he turned his attention to the east, and compelled the Bactrian and Parthian warriors to own him as their master. Cyrus is now free for the great enterprise of his career, the struggle which is to decide whether the Persian or the Chaldean is to rule in Babylon, the seat of the world's empire. He is now brought within the sweep of the Biblical record. There is an ethnological as well as a religious interest attached to this Persian advance upon Babylon. It is the first great collision on which clear light of history falls between two great families of nations, the final result of which was to push back the Semitic races from the front rank of humanity and to place in their stead the Aryan nations who were henceforth to occupy the high places of the field. Aryan and Semitic thus meet in arms before the walls of Babylon. It is most fitting that the advent of the leader of a movement which had such far-reaching results should be inaugurated with so sublime an expectation as that with which Cyrus is hailed by Isaiah. He was the Morning Star of the Aryan races. Persia made way for Greece, and Greece prepared for Rome, and out of Rome has sprung the modern world, and in the modern world the most vigorous branch of the Aryan stock more and more unmistakably rules. On the downfall of Babylon, Cyrus does not immediately take possession of the position he has won. With the same politic end in view as had previously caused him to make a Median Prince precede him at Ecbatana, he now

places another of the same nationality upon the vacant throne of Babylon. For two years Darius reigns, then dies; and Cyrus quietly takes possession as the sole ruler of the territories he had inherited and conquered. Henceforth the Persian who rules from Babylon is "The Great King." The edict for the return of the exiles and the rebuilding of the temple was issued 536 B.C. It was the Declaration of the Imperial Policy, and the basis of all that came after. It announced by implication friendship between the empire and the Jews—a friendship to which the Jews remained faithful till, two hundred years afterwards, Alexander the Great erected the Brazen Empire upon the ruins of that of Silver. Cyrus was a man of war to the close, and died in battle, disastrous according to one account, victorious according to another. (*G. M. Grant, B.D.*)

That the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled.—*The fulfilment of the word of the Lord*:—Here are four things which claim our attention. I. THE REGARD OF GOD FOR HIS WORD.

"Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled," &c. (Jer. xxix. 10; Num. xxiii. 19). "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words shall not pass away." "The Word of the Lord endureth for ever." "He abideth faithful; He cannot deny Himself." We have in this—1. An assurance that the prophecies and promises of His Word will be fulfilled.

"As the architect progressively executes every part of the plan which he has delineated, till the whole design is completed, so God in His providence performs in due order all the prophecies of His Word: a great proportion of His great scheme has already been accomplished, and revolving ages will hasten the performance of all the rest in the appointed periods."

2. An encouragement to trust in Him. "Whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be set on high" (Psa. xlii. 4, 5; xviii. 2).

II. THE MERCY OF GOD TO HIS PEOPLE. This mercy is seen—1. In the design and effect of the captivity. "Thus the Divine word of chastisement," says Schultz,

"ever goes hand in hand with His word of salvation." 2. In the release from captivity. (1) As to its time. (2) As to its meaning. It was an assurance of the Divine forgiveness of their sins. Their release was also the commencement of many and great blessings. "What a fulness of salvation after the night of misfortune—the entire extent of Messianic redemption."

III. THE INFLUENCE OF GOD UPON THE SPIRIT OF MAN. "The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia."

1. The nature of this influence. "This does not mean," says Schultz, "that Cyrus was influenced in the same way as were the prophets, upon whom, with their greater susceptibility, the Spirit of the Lord came; but yet an influence in consequence of which Cyrus made the will of God his own will, and executed it in the things under consideration. God gave him the resolution and the desire to execute His intention."

All the good in human life is the result of Divine influence. 2. The subject of this influence: Cyrus king of Persia. "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water; He turneth it whithersoever He will."

He is now using the powers of the world to promote the interests of His cause. 3. The design of this influence. "The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, that he made a proclamation," &c. In all the inspirations and impressions He imparts to man, His aim is to save and bless him, and to make him an agent in blessing others.

IV. THE SUITABLE RESPONSE OF MAN TO THE INFLUENCE OF GOD. "Cyrus made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom," &c. (*W. Jones.*)

The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus.—*Inspiration tested*:—The soul of man is the great arbiter. We need not, therefore, bow down before every man or woman who claims inspiration. We listen respectfully to the claim, and say, "What does it amount to? what end would you accomplish? to what purpose does this inspiration you claim point?" and if in answer there should come replies indicative of reform, progress, purification, liberation, enlargement, beneficence, verily the answer will prove the inspiration that is claimed. No man is inspired who wishes to do evil. Disclaim and repudiate, not with sorrow, but with indignation, the inspiration that would seek to curtail liberty, arrest progress, hinder the mission of philanthropy—that would overload the weak, still further impoverish the poor, and shut off from the meanest dwelling any beam of daylight.

(*J. Parker, D.D.*) *Divine communications*:—Last week I was in the office of one of our great Glasgow merchants, and, while we were conversing together, he suddenly asked to be excused for a moment, as there was a summons to speak with another Glasgow firm. Without moving from his seat, without being put about in the slightest, or even turning his head, he lifted from before him the telephone connection. A few minutes passed: not a word did I hear of that conversation except "Goodbye." That was all I heard; but I knew that the man

to whom I was talking had been put in possession of a fact which I knew nothing about, and yet all the while I had been in his presence. He had heard, through the special connection that he had, the business and the object of the firm with which he was in communication. Ah me! Sometimes at your side a man gets a communication from Almighty God that you know nothing about, and that is the reason of his activity, and that is the programme that he resolves to carry out at all hazards. He has heard from God; he has been in communication with the Almighty. (*John Robertson.*) *Cyrus selected*:—It seems strange at first that this man should have been chosen for such commission. God might have employed some one of His own people, Ezekiel, for instance, investing him with supernatural power, as Moses was invested when he delivered the nation from its first captivity in Egypt. But no; He selected rather a pagan king, whose appointment had been foretold by Isaiah more than a hundred years before. Often since then God has pursued a like course, employing for His purposes those who were not His professed servants—men of wealth, of learning, of position, of power. He does not count their service as excuse for withholding from Him the trust and obedience which are His due; He does not condone their idolatry; but He permits them to be His helpers, sometimes, it would seem, in order that, brought thus in line with His beneficent designs, they may be persuaded to come heartily into His kingdom. (*T. J. Holmes.*) *Divine stirrings in the human soul*:—It is taught that, besides the general moral influences, unconscious and diffused—as it were distilled, like the dew, in silence and darkness—there is an active energy, arousing, filling, impelling the souls of men. It is said that the Spirit of the Lord came upon judges, that it came upon kings, upon prophets, upon apostles—came mightily and stirred them all up. As sudden and mighty winds make trees rock, and wrench them, and even overturn them, so, as by a mighty rushing wind, the Spirit of God has descended on men—on Samuel, on David, on Isaiah, on Paul. It is taught likewise that, while this energy of the Divine mind prepared certain men for emergencies, and prepared them to act official parts, all true Christians, all godly souls, are opening to a quickening influence, if not so mighty, yet of the same general kind—an influence which stimulates, assists, ripens, and so finally sanctifies. *Revivals*:—There have been great awakenings in literature. Suddenly a nation has, so to say, sprung to its feet and said, "Let us read!" That is a mere matter of what is called profane history. Ages have passed in which men cared not to read, or write, or think; if there were any books to be opened, as a rule they lay untouched; but quite suddenly there has been what is termed a literary revival. Is such a thing possible? If it is possible to have a literary revival—that is, a revival of the love of learning, the love of reading, the love of writing—why may there not be such a thing as a religious revival, in which men shall say suddenly, but unanimously, "Let us pray"? And when men so moved to pray they shorten the distance between earth and heaven. It would be perhaps most difficult to believe in a religious revival if there had not been analogous revivals—revivals of learning, revivals of art. (*J. Parker, D.D.*) **That he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom.**—*The edict of Cyrus*:—**I. THE DEVOUT ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY.** 1. In the bestowment of His favours. 2. In the authority of His commands. **II. THE MAGNANIMOUS EMANCIPATION OF GOD'S PEOPLE.** 1. The spirit in which this emancipation was made. (1) It was generous. (2) It was pious. 2. The purpose for which the emancipation was made. **III. THE GENEROUS EXHORTATION TO ASSIST GOD'S PEOPLE.** 1. Its purport. 2. The persons to whom it was addressed. 3. The pattern by which it was enforced. Rawlinson regards "the free-will offering for the house of God" as the gift of Cyrus himself. He not only wished them well, but helped them to realise his wishes. **Lessons:** 1. Be prepared to acknowledge and appreciate moral excellence outside of the visible Church of God (Luke vii. 1-10; Acts x. 22). 2. Imitate Cyrus in his practical acknowledgment of the sovereignty of God. 3. When we cannot offer our labours in good enterprises, let us cheerfully offer our gifts. (*William Jones.*) *The proclamation of Cyrus*:—View it—**I. In a way of LITERAL INTERPRETATION.** 1. The person by whom this proclamation was issued. 2. The proclamation itself. **II. In a way of SPIRITUAL IMPROVEMENT.** 1. What a sad state the men of the world at large are in. They are slaves, being in bondage to their lusts, to the world, to Satan, and to the grave (Rom. vi. 12, viii. 21; Eph. ii. 2; 2 Tim. ii. 26; 2 Pet. ii. 19; 1 John v. 19.) 2. What an invaluable blessing the gospel is. 3. What will be necessary to obtain what it offers? 4. What is our bounden duty when it has become effectual for our good?

God is said to "raise the spirits" of such as are ambitious for liberty; and it need not be said to whom we are indebted if we differ from others (1 Cor. iv. 7, xv. 10; Jas. i. 17). (*William Sleight.*) *The proclamation of Cyrus and the proclamation of the gospel minister compared*:—The text suggests to us a resemblance between the proclamation of Cyrus and that of a gospel preacher. I. The proclamation of both is **MERCIFUL**. The proclamation of Cyrus meant restoration. 1. Restoration of lost liberty; and—2. Of lost religious privileges. The gospel preacher has to preach deliverance to the captives and set men to rebuild the temple of the soul that has fallen into ruins by reason of sin. II. The proclamation of both is **DIVINE**. The God of heaven gave Cyrus this commission—it did not spring out of his own policy or philanthropy; it had its origin in God. "The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus." The true gospel minister is a messenger of heaven. He has not to proclaim his own theories, but the Word of God. No man is a true gospel preacher whose spirit has not been "stirred up" by the Lord, and who does not feel that necessity has been laid upon him. How does God stir up a man to preach now? 1. By a powerful revelation to his soul of the miserable moral condition of humanity. He is made to see all men in bondage and in ruin. 2. By firing him with the spirit of Christly philanthropy. The love of Christ is made to constrain him, &c. III. The proclamation of both is **UNIVERSAL**. The proclamation of Cyrus was to every Jew. Not one excluded. It is so with the gospel minister: his message is to all. "Go ye into all the world." He calls upon every man to repent, to believe; he invites every man to liberty and peace. IV. The proclamation of both is **PRACTICABLE**. Cyrus laid down no terms difficult to fulfil. 1. The power to return every Jew possessed. All necessary helps were promised. 2. Cyrus furnished them liberally with the means to rebuild their own temple (vers. 7–11), so every man is enabled to obey the gospel. V. The proclamation of both is **EXTENSIVELY DISOBEYED**. (*Homilist.*) *To build Him an house at Jerusalem*.—God is calling men to build:—God is calling men to build—not necessarily in wood and stone and iron, but to build character, life, utility. And this can be done everywhere. Not to public building are all men called. What sweet homes some men have built! The moment you pass within the door you feel the genius of home welcoming and blessing you; the traveller says, "I must tarry here"; the hungry man says, "There is bread within these walls; I know it though I do not see it." What businesses some men are building, marked by high policy, reputable for known morality, uprightness, straightforwardness—complicated businesses, yet every line palpitating with conscience. This kind of building is not always recognised as it ought to be; but it ought to be pointed out as a possibility to every man. We cannot all build upon the mountain-top or in the great thoroughfares of the city, but we can build privately, quietly, secretly: we can build up broken hearts, we can be confirming feeble knees, we can be towers of strength to men who are enfeebled and impoverished. (*J. Parker, D.D.*) *God's house built for the sake of man*:—What need had God for a house? He made the stars; He wears the constellations as a garment; the heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain Him: what does He want with a house? Nothing; but He knows that we do; He knows that the building of the house is necessary for our education. What need has He of our prayer? None. Can we tell Him anything? No. Does He not know what things we have need of before we ask Him? Yes. Why, then, should He call upon us to tell Him what He knows, to ask Him for what He well understands we need? Why should there be any throne of grace or altar of prayer? For our sakes. This is a means of education. We learn things by doing them. (*Ibid.*)

Ver. 3. Let him go up to Jerusalem.—*The release of the Jews from Babylon an illustration of the redemption of man from sin*:—We discover an analogy in these two things as regards—I. **THE SUBJECTS**. The Jews were exiles and captives in Babylon. "Whosoever committeth sin is the slave of sin" (John viii. 34). In his sinful state man is an exile from his true condition and place, and the bondsman of evil powers. II. **THE AGENTS**. Cyrus and Jesus Christ. The analogy between them is at least twofold. 1. Both were called of God to this work. Ages before his birth Cyrus was prenamed for this work (Isa. xlv. 24, xlv. 6). And Jesus Christ is pre-eminently the Servant, the Anointed, the Sent of God (Isa. xlii. 1, lxi. 1–3; Luke iv. 18, 19; John iii. 16, 17; Gal. iv. 4, 5; 1 John iv. 9). 2. Both effected this work by battling with and overcoming the oppressors. Cyrus had to conquer the Babylonian Empire before he could release the captive Jews. And our Lord

and Saviour, as the Son of Man, encountered sin and mastered it. III. THE SOURCE. In both cases the blessing flowed from the free and unmerited grace of God. The Jews had no claim upon Him against whom they had so persistently rebelled. "God commendeth His love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." IV. THE EXTENT. 1. It is offered to all. 2. It is accepted only by some. Great numbers preferred to remain in Babylon. (1) Many did not feel any deprivation or degradation in their exile and subjection. (2) Many had attachments and interests in Babylon which they could not or would not leave. V. "GO UP TO BUILD THE HOUSE OF THE LORD WHICH IS IN JERUSALEM." A striking illustration of the grand end of redemption. (*W. Jones.*) *Our choice of the true life:—* I. CYRUS PRESENTED THESE EXILED JEWS WITH THE CHANCE OF A FREE CHOICE. Cyrus did not compel. These Jews might, or they might not, go to Jerusalem. It was for each one of them to choose. So Christ, in His call to the true life and heaven, puts before men the chance of an utterly free choice. "Ye will not come unto Me that ye might have life." II. This choice which Cyrus presented to these exiled Jews was a CHOICE OF EXCLUSIONS. If they chose to go to Palestine they must yield what things would keep them in Babylon. They might carry with them many things (vers. 7-11). But their houses and lands, every detaining thing, must be surrendered. So this choice which Christ presents to men is necessarily a choice of exclusions. Christianity is not narrowness. Read the charter of a Christian liberty in 1 Cor. iii. 21-23. But Christ comes to save a man from sin. What Babylonish and preventing sins you cleave to must be yielded. III. IT WAS A CHOICE TOWARD NOBLENES which Cyrus gave these exiled Jews. Surely it was better, nobler to go to Jerusalem and rebuild God's temple than to dwell in exiled ease in Babylon. IV. This choice which Cyrus opened for these exiled Jews was a choice NECESSITATING FAITH. Between Babylon and Palestine stretched vast wide sandy plains. But for the heartening of the Jews choosing the nobler destiny there was the Divine promise. So for the Christian, the man who accepts Christ's call to the nobler life, there are Divine promises. V. THIS NECESSITY OF CHOICE. For every one of us, in high spiritual way, this choice confronts Babylon or Jerusalem. (*Homiletic Review.*) **His God be with him.**—*God with us:*—Notice—I. THE DEVOUT WISH EXPRESSED: "His God be with him." It is equivalent to our "goodbye," which is an abbreviation of "God be with you." The wish comprises two things. 1. Personal relation to God: "His God." This expression may be viewed in two aspects. (1) "His God," as opposed to the gods of the heathen. (2) "His God," as engaged to him in covenant relation. Thus our Lord speaks, "My Father, and your Father"; "My God, and your God" (John xx. 17). Martin Luther said that the sweetness of the gospel consisted chiefly in its pronouns, such as me, my, thy, &c. "My Lord and my God" (John xx. 28). "Who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal. ii. 20). "Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. iii. 8). 2. Realisation of the presence of God: "His God be with him." His presence is a guarantee of all the help and blessing which we need. But in uttering this wish in respect to the Jews, Cyrus probably had an eye to two things which the presence of God would secure to them: (1) Guidance and guardianship on their long journey. (2) Success in their great undertaking. II. THE KIND EXPRESSION OF THIS WISH. The expression of this wish indicates on the part of Cyrus—1. Reverence towards God. He does not utter these words thoughtlessly, but seriously. 2. Kindness towards the captives. He wished them well, and proved the sincerity of his wishes by practically helping them in their best interests. Conclusion: 1. Do we sustain this personal relation to God? 2. Do we realise the blessed presence of God? 3. Do we desire that others also may realise His gracious presence? (*William Jones.*) *Our God:*—As He is not a God without infinite wisdom, and infinite power, and infinite goodness, and infinite blessedness, &c., so He passes over in this covenant all that which presents Him as the most adorable Being to His creatures. He will be to them as great, as wise, as powerful, as good as He is in Himself; and the assuring us in this covenant to be our God imports also that He will do as much for us, as we would do for ourselves were we furnished with the same goodness, power, and wisdom. In being our God He testifies that it is all one, as if we had the same perfections in our own power to employ for our use; for He being possessed with them, it is as much as if we ourselves were possessed with them for our own advantage, according to the rules of wisdom and the several conditions we pass through for His glory. (*Stephen Charnocke, B.D.*)

Ver. 4. Let the men of the place help him with silver.—*Spontaneous offering:—*

"Not many years since," writes a clergyman, "I had occasion to solicit funds to aid in the prosecution of a work of benevolence. I stepped into the office of a Christian friend, with whom I had a partial acquaintance, and incidentally mentioned the unpleasant business before me, and inquired of him for the residence of a certain benevolent individual, and added that I hoped to get one dollar of him. After receiving directions, I turned to go out. 'But stop,' said this brother, 'suppose you let me have the privilege of contributing a little of the money which the Lord has lent me to this cause. Put down £20 for me.' I expressed my surprise that he should contribute so liberally, and remarked that I should feel myself in duty bound not to call on him very soon on a similar errand. 'Well, then,' said he, 'my brother, I think you will very much mistake your duty. If you knew how much pleasure it gave me to contribute of my substance to the Lord, you would feel no reluctance in calling again. And now let me charge you, when engaged in similar business, never to pass me by. Call, and I think I shall be able to do something; and if not, my prayers shall go with you.'" (*Signal*.) *A stimulus to generous offering*:—Two weeks ago I told you that three thousand dollars had got to be raised to pay for the repairs of this house. The plates were sent round, and about six hundred dollars were raised. I was heartily ashamed, and have not got over it yet. Last week the trustees came, and asked me if I would name the matter again, and I said, "No, I will not." But this week, upon their renewed application, I have consented to speak once more. If this don't do, you may pay your debt how you can, for I will never mention it again. I'm not going to be a pump to be thrust into men's pockets to force up what ought to come up freely. When the surgeon comes to a place where he must cut, he had better cut. For more than a year I've seen that our plate collections grew meaner and meaner. I didn't want to face you with such things as I've got to say to-day, and I put it off as long as I could. Now I shall speak plainly once for all, not having the face to bring the matter up again. This debt has got to be paid, and will you meet it honourably, and pay it like men, or will you let it drip, drip, drip out of you reluctantly, a few dollars at a time? You can take your choice. I'm not going to try to drill money out of you as I would drill stones. The amount of meanness among respectable people is appalling. One needs to take a solar microscope in order to see some men. (*H. W. Beecher*.)

Vers. 7-11. Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the Lord.—*The restoration of the sacred vessels*:—I. THE PRESERVATION OF THE SACRED VESSELS (vers. 7, 8). These are the vessels which are mentioned in 2 Chron. xxxvi. 7 and Dan. i. 2. In the providence of God most of these vessels were remarkably preserved, to be in due time restored to their original place and uses. Learn: Since God is so careful of the mere vessels consecrated to His service, may we not rest assured that He will much more preserve His consecrated people? II. THE NUMERATION OF THE SACRED VESSELS. This numbering indicates—1. The reverent care of Cyrus for these sacred vessels. 2. The grave responsibility of Sheshbazzar for these sacred vessels. Learn: That persons, places, and things which are devoted to religious uses should be reverently regarded by us. III. THE RESTORATION OF THE SACRED VESSELS (ver. 11). 1. This was a fulfilment of prophecy (Jer. xxvii. 22). 2. This is an illustration of the restoration of perverted things to their true uses. The Lord Jesus Christ is the great restorer of the violated order and the broken harmony of the universe of God. (*William Jones*.) *The restitution of the stolen vessels*:—This appears to be more than an act of generosity or justice. A certain religious import belongs to it. It put an end to an ancient insult offered by Babylon to the God of Israel, and it might be taken as an act of homage offered to Jehovah by Cyrus. Yet it was only a restitution, a return of what was God's before, and so a type of every gift man makes to God. (*Walter F. Adeney, M.A.*) *Mithredath*:—It is not without significance that the treasurer who handed over their temple-prosperity to the Jews was named "Mithredath"—a word that means "given by Mithra," or "devoted to Mithra." This suggests that the Persian sun-god was honoured among the servants of Cyrus, and yet that one who by name at least was especially associated with this divinity was constrained to honour the God of Israel. Next to Judaism and Christianity, the worship of Mithra showed the greatest vitality of all religions in Western Asia, and later even in Europe. So vigorous was it as recently as the commencement of the Christian era, that M. Renan has remarked that if the Roman world had not become Christian it would have become Mithraistic. In the homage paid by Mithredath to the God of Israel may we not see an image of the recognition of the claims of the Supreme by our priests of the sun—Kepler,

Newton, Faraday? (*Ibid.*) *A restoration of misappropriated property*:—There was a great restoration of misappropriated property. What a restoration there will one day be. What have men taken away from God's Church? Nearly everything they could lay hands on. They have taken away gold, art, music, miracles, inspiration, rationalism, morality, science, and they have left God a very bare house. When the period of spiritual revival has come, and the holy issue is wrought out in all its meaning, all these things will be brought back again. Art will come with her brush and pencil, and say, "I will beautify the house of God's revelation." Music will bring back her harp and her instrument of ten strings, and her cymbals and organs, and say, "Make me a handmaid in God's house, for all I have and am must belong to Him"; and Reason—exiled, expatriated Reason shall return, saying "They have kept me in vile servitude; admit me to my Father's house." And Science will come and pray; and Morality will say, "They have been trying to divorce me from theology, from right religious motive and impulse, and I have died like a flower that has been plucked; restore me to my vital relations, and I will once more bloom in the house of God." (*J. Parker, D.D.*)

CHAPTER II.

VERS. 1, 2. Now these are the children of the province that went up out of the captivity.—*Going up out of captivity*:—I. THE DELIVERANCE FROM CAPTIVITY. 1. This captivity had been—(1) A degradation; (2) a subjection; (3) a transformation; (4) a retribution. The most deplorable degradation and the most real and terrible subjection are those of sin. 2. This deliverance—(1) Originated in the favour of God; (2) was effected by an unlikely agent; (3) was permissive and not compulsory. Salvation from the bondage of sin is freely offered in the gospel, but no one is compelled to accept the offer. II. THE JOURNEY HOME. This journey was—1. A restoration. 2. A restoration to their own home. 3. A restoration to religious privileges. The salvation of Jesus Christ restores man to his true condition and to his forfeited inheritance. III. THE SUBORDINATION TO LEADERS. Society could not exist without leaders and rulers. They are necessary—1. For the maintenance of order. 2. For insuring progress. 3. Because of the differences in the characters and abilities of men. (*William Jones.*) *Emancipation*:—The Rev. J. Jackson Fuller, of the Cameroons, a coloured missionary, said at the Young People's Meeting of the Baptist Centenary: "Although our fathers in my country were born under the British flag, yet we were nothing more and nothing else than the chattels of the Englishman. We were British slaves, and it was partly by the missionaries going to our country—the island of Jamaica—and telling us of the love of Jesus Christ that their vivid description of our oppressed condition aroused the English nation, and in the year 1834, after paying twenty millions of money, you set us all free. The very day you passed the Emancipation Act in England, I was made free. You young people would have been glad, or your fathers before you would have been glad, had they the opportunity of seeing that morning in the year 1834 when thousands of children and their fathers and mothers gathered together during the evening, waiting for that morning of the 31st of July to dawn. At eleven o'clock at night they gathered in mass and waited for the hour to pass when the clock should strike twelve. And then you would have been glad to see that mighty mass of human beings rise on their feet and sing the Doxology—'Praise God, from whom all blessings flow.' I was among that number that gathered that night. I heard the Doxology sung. I am one of the boys that were rescued when you paid twenty millions of money and set our fathers free."

VERS. 2-64. The number of the men of the people of Israel.—*A suggestive record*:—Consider—I. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FACT OF THE RECORD. 1. It was an honour to the pious and patriotic ones who returned. 2. It is an illustration of the Divine record of God's spiritual Israel (Luke x. 20). 3. It suggests that every one of His people is precious in the sight of God (Isa. xlix. 16). II. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CONTENTS OF THE RECORD. We have in this list—1. Significant persons. (1) Zerubbabel, an ancestor of the Messiah (Matt. i. 12). (2) Jeshua, who was a distinguished type of Jesus Christ (Zeoh. iii., vi. 11-13). 2. A signi-

ficant place: Bethlehem (ver. 21). 3. Significant numbers. (*William Jones.*) *Religious service*:—It is here suggested—I. THAT THERE ARE VARIOUS SPHERES OF SERVICE IN THE CHURCH OF GOD (Eph. iv. 11, 12). II. THAT THE HUMBLEST SPHERE OF SERVICE IN THE CHURCH OF GOD IS A PLACE OF PRIVILEGE AND HONOUR. III. THE PRIVILEGE OF SERVICE IN THE CHURCH OF GOD IS NOT LIMITED TO ANY PARTICULAR RACES OR CLASSES OF MEN. (*Ibid.*)

Ver. 62. *These sought their register.*—*The importance of a clear spiritual pedigree*:—I. THE DOUBTFUL PEDIGREE AMONGST THE PEOPLE IS AN ILLUSTRATION OF UNCERTAINTY AS TO OUR SPIRITUAL STATE. 1. This uncertainty may consist with association with the people of God (vers. 59, 60). 2. This uncertainty must involve spiritual loss. (1) Of spiritual joy. (2) Of spiritual usefulness. Lacking Christian assurance our testimony for Christ would be likely to be deficient in clearness and attractiveness, in fervour and force; it would especially fail to set forth the joyful character of true religion. II. THE DOUBTFUL PEDIGREE AMONGST THE PRIESTS IS AN ILLUSTRATION OF UNCERTAINTY AS TO OUR MINISTERIAL CALLING AND CONDITION. 1. A ministerial pedigree may be lost by reason of worldliness. 2. The loss of ministerial pedigree involves a corresponding loss of ministerial power and reward. 3. The final decision as to the standing of a minister of uncertain pedigree must be given by God Himself (ver. 63). (*Ibid.*) *Melancholy records*:—Here is the picture of men seeking a register, and finding nothing in it; looking up old family papers, and their names are not found in the tender record. A man not known at home! He may have been born there, and have lived a good many years of his early life there; but to-day he has no record on the hearthstone, no place at the table, no portion in the family memory: it would be a breach of courtesy to name his name. Something must have happened. There is an ineffable sadness about this: all nature seems to be violated; instincts have been rooted out; natural affection seems to have been burned down and utterly destroyed. Consider the tremendous possibility of outliving one's natural rights, or forfeiting birthright, inheritance, paternal blessing, all the wealth of home's true love. Talk of falling from grace! What is this but an apostasy from the best grace—a fall from childhood's trust, the wilful obliteration of the name from the scroll whose meaning is nothing but love? Here is a child who is not named in the will. Consider what you have done. How infinite in detestation must have been the character which resulted in this issue! Take more general ground, and the principle still applies. Here is a man who is unknown in the community; his name may be written upon certain official papers, but it is not inscribed on the scroll of the heart, on the memory of gratitude; it is not to be found anywhere put up as a thing most prized and loved. He is but a figure in the community, but a tax-payer, but an occupier of a house; he is not a living presence in any sense of beneficence. When he is buried no one will miss him in the heart. His name is not written upon the register of trust, affection, or benevolent interest. Seeing that all these things are possible, there must be a reason for them: what is it? It is always a moral reason, where it touches any conception of general justice. At the last shall we go to the book of life and not find our names there? The answer is in our own lives. Sad to turn away from the record, saying, "My name is not there!" But, blessed be God, the humblest, least, vilest may, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, the whole mystery of the priesthood of Christ, have their names written in heaven. (*J. Parker, D.D.*)

Vers. 65–70. *And some of the chief of the fathers, when they came to the house of the Lord which is at Jerusalem, offered freely.*—*Possessions and offerings*:—I. THE COMPLETION OF THEIR JOURNEY. "They came to the house of the Lord at Jerusalem." II. THE EXTENT OF THEIR POSSESSIONS (vers. 65–67). III. THE PRESENTATION OF THEIR OFFERINGS. 1. The object of their offerings. 2. The spirit of their offerings. (1) They offered promptly, without delay. (2) They offered spontaneously, without constraint. 3. The measure of their offerings. (1) Proportionately. (2) Liberally. IV. THE SETTLEMENT IN THEIR CITIES. This suggests—1. Home after exile. 2. Rest after a long and tedious journey. (*William Jones.*) *Offering freely*:—As I was reading my Greek Testament the other day, I was delighted with a discovery concerning the well-known text: "God loveth a cheerful giver." The word "cheerful" is our word for "hilarious." And I began to imagine what would happen if the meaning of the word was put into action. "Will you give five pounds to missions?" "Will you contribute a

hundred pounds towards our evangelistic work this winter?" "Ha, ha, ha! I am only too glad for the opportunity to give, since I have so abundantly received." And the hilarious giver writes out a cheque on the spot. How much better that sounds than the doleful, "Oh, dear! I am tired with the never-ending calls for money, money, money." But this "hilarious" giving is not possible except the Spirit is dwelling richly within. For only the Spirit shows the greatness of that salvation which we received through Christ, and the greatness of our consequent obligation. (*A. J. Gordon.*) *The Church the rallying point of nations:*—The temple and its worship marked the last days of the kingdom of the Jews anterior to their captivity, and formed the point around which the returning wanderers gathered at their restoration to the home of their fathers. So around the Church, the events of all successive empires have gathered since the day of Pentecost.

I. EVERY STATE OF IMPORTANCE, alike in ancient, mediæval, or modern history HAS GATHERED ROUND THE CHURCH, AND HAS RECEIVED ITS SHAPE AND DEFINITENESS FROM HER. Egypt, Assyria, Persia, Greece, and Rome each became important in their different times in proportion as they were able to bless or to chasten the Church of God. The long dynasties that ruled on the banks of the Nile; the invasion of the Hyksos; the vast undertakings of Rameses or Amasis; the gigantic records of antiquity which rise in such sepulchral magnificence in Egypt from amidst her waste of sand; the high philosophy of one Ptolemy and the literary research of another, proclaim one after the other in successive generations the splendour of an empire whose principal end of existence was to aid in the throes of the early Church; to give a home to the famine-stricken patriarchs; to be a scourge in the successive invasions of Shishak, Pharaoh Hophra, and Pharaoh Necho, and to be the probation of the Jews when God ordained the Chaldean captivity. All these seem to have been the main objects for which Egypt existed as a nation. So in each successive period in after-history the Church became more and more the central body which gave shape to the kingdoms of the world, alike in mediæval as in modern history. The vast multitudes from the north-east of Europe which swept like a bankless flood over the fertile plains of Italy, arrested by the walls of Constantinople or of Rome, or diverted by the intercession of Ambrose or Gregory, became at length themselves children of the Church whom they had persecuted; and the imaginative genius of the Goth lent mellowness, sublimity, and tone to the architecture and service of the Church. Men who came to persecute remained to pray, and the Gothic invasion formed an era in ecclesiastical history. The kingdom of France beheld a repetition of the acts of Constantine in the conversion of Clovis; and Clotilda and her husband resembled in the story of their conversion Ethelbert, king of Kent, and Bertha his wife. Charlemagne followed in the passage of years, in family as well as name mixed up with those who were giving protection to while they received their own definiteness from the Church of Christ. And the gifts of Pepin became a record to a long after-day of the power which the Church had to give shape to the early civilisation of Europe. From the death of Charlemagne throughout eight following centuries, the interests of Europe became synonymous with those of France or Germany, while they oscillated in alternating supremacy, each of them seeking the recognition of the Church for their claims. The Great Reformation which broke out over Northern and Western Europe bore upon the billows of its tempestuous sea the vessels that carried the destinies of Spain and Austria, France and England, and many of the minor states of Germany; while religious questions became the direct causes which shook the dynasty of the Stuarts, and agitated France through the illustrious periods of Catharine de Medici and Henry the Great and the imbecile reign of Louis XIII; while the names that have rendered so many pages of French history interesting—the Hugonot and Coligni, Condé and Turenne—were immediately brought out by questions connected with the doctrine and discipline of the Church in defence of which each one of them was brought before the notice of history.

II. THE CHURCH HAS IN HER THAT PRINCIPLE OF VITALITY WHICH GIVES HER THE POWER TO REKINDLE LIFE WHERE IT HAS BEEN EXTINGUISHED, AND TO RECONSTRUCT THE SHATTERED PORTIONS OF FABRICS WHICH HAVE FALLEN TO DECAY. The children of Israel, leaving their patriarchal government at Goshen to enter upon that developed state of their history which was to issue in the kingly line of David, preserved their nationality and drew together their otherwise scattered forces around the tabernacle, the priesthood, and the lawgiver; and the Church of God became in the wilderness of Sinai the source and fountain of national life and existence to the tribes reseaking their home. A second time the chosen people were called upon to bewail their sins in a long captivity; a second

time their national distinctiveness bid fair to be lost, but the voices of Daniel and Ezekiel sounded loudly to penitence and prayer by the Chebar and in Babylon. These were the voices of the Church of God—these represented that eternal principle around which national and individual existence might coil and find compactness. These were the forces from within which kept together the people of the captivity, and were the means of restoring them in their national integrity to their homes. Forlorn and orphaned indeed must the returning tribes have felt; like men who in the chill of the morning wander amid the fading flowers of the banquet of yesterday. At that moment the Church again became the centre of their national revival and around the foundation stones of the temple the scattered people again became a nation. (*E. Monro*.)

CHAPTER III.

VERS. 1-13. And when the seventh month was come.—Rebuilding the temple:—

I. THEY BEGAN BY RE-ESTABLISHING THE WORSHIP AND SERVICE OF THE HOLY PLACE. They set up an altar, and offered the daily sacrifice. A wise beginning. Their task was hard, and they did well to begin with God. They made the right use of fear. It stirred them up to religious duty. **II. BEFORE SETTING THEMSELVES TO THEIR TASKS THEY KEPT THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES.** The full repression of our religious joy, even though it be prolonged, will not delay the performance of life's severer tasks. It is a suitable preparation for them. **III. THEY USED THEIR TREASURES IN SECURING THE BEST MATERIALS AND THE MOST SKILLED LABOUR.** **IV. THE FOUNDATIONS WERE LAID AMIDST ACCLAMATIONS OF JOY.** Many of the psalms which fill the Psalter with joyous strains were doubtless sung or composed on this occasion. **V. IT WAS, HOWEVER, A JOY MINGLED WITH SORROW.** (*Willard G. Sperry*.) *Rebuilding the temple:—***I. THE FIRST THING THEY DID WAS TO REBUILD THE ALTAR.** This was a right beginning. The altar of sacrifice was the centre of the Jewish religion; just as its antitype, the Cross, is the centre of Christianity. The Cross is our altar; it stands at the centre of our religion. 1. The altar of burnt-offering in this instance was intended as a safeguard. There is no security like that which a timid soul finds under the shadow of the altar (Psa. lxxxiv. 3). A man is never so safe from adverse influences as when upon his knees. 2. This altar was "set upon its bases"—that is, it was restored upon its former foundations. There is virtue in observing old landmarks. Some things never grow obsolete. Air and water and sunlight are just what they always were, nor is human ingenuity likely to improve them in any way. There are some truths which bear to our spiritual constitution the same relation that light does to the eyes and water to the lungs. Nothing can amend or improve them. There may be new formulations, new modes of presentation; but the altar of the Christian religion will stand on its old bases as long as time endures. 3. The ceremonies of this restored altar were conducted after the prescribed form. **II. THEY NEXT PREPARED FOR THE REBUILDING OF THEIR TEMPLE.** 1. The altar meanwhile was kept in constant use. Its fires never went out. There was no lack of offerings upon it. The people had learned by sad experience their dependence upon God. 2. There was little difficulty in collecting the necessary funds. 3. The workmen were secured by generous outlay and paid promptly when the wages fell due. 4. The materials for the temple were collected from every quarter. Tyre and Sidon and the forests of Lebanon were put under contribution. Thus God ever utilises the nations. The Cæsars built highways for the propagation of the gospel. Soulless corporations in our time are binding the far corners of the earth together with iron bands and cables, not knowing nor caring that God's kingdom is thus being ushered in. (*D. J. Burrell, D.D.*) *Rebuilding the temple:—***I. RELIGION IS, OR SHOULD BE, A UNITING FORCE.** **II. WE NEED NOT, AND SHOULD NOT, WAIT BEFORE WE WORSHIP GOD.** **III. THERE SHOULD BE SOME REGULARITY IN OUR DEVOTION.** **IV. OUR OFFERING MUST COME FROM THE HEART AS WELL AS FROM THE HAND.** **V. THE CAUSE OF CHRIST MUST HAVE THE BEST SERVICE WE CAN SECURE.** **VI. SOME TAKE A HIGHER, SOME A HUMBLER POST IN THE SERVICE OF GOD.** **VII. WE DO WELL TO REJOICE WHEN WE LAY THE FOUNDATION OF A USEFUL WORK.** **VIII. JOY IS SAFE AND WISE WHEN IT PASSES INTO PRAISE.** **IX. SORROW AND JOY BLEND STRANGELY IN THE EVENTS OF LIFE.** (*W. Clarkson, B.A.*) *The benefits of the captivity:—*Notice—

I. THE PEOPLE ARE AGAIN HEARTILY UNITED IN ACTION. They "gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem." These cheering words sound like a reminiscence of the best days of David, Hezekiah, and Josiah. A revival of union was sorely needed. The last three reigns before the captivity had been marked by unnatural discords. The providential cure of this evil was captivity. Two generations at least must pass away, and their feuds be buried with them; the worth of a temple and the blessing of a pure worship must be learned by their loss. This method of cementing nations was not new, and it has been exemplified since in almost countless instances. Every forward movement in society seems to be preceded by seasons of trial, whose hot fires are needed to fuse the heart and will of the people into one.

II. THEY MADE A RIGHT BEGINNING OF THEIR WORK. They began with an altar. Can this be the same people whose closing record seventy years before had been that "they polluted the house of the Lord"? Reverence as well as union had been developed by captivity. They might have begun by clearing away the ruins, but that would have been a second step before the first; not even the rubbish of an unhallowed past may be touched without the blessing of God; they might have held a council to determine what they would do, but this would have been taking their own advice first and afterwards seeking the endorsement of Jehovah; they might have raised the walls around the spot before building the altar upon it, but that would have been asking God to own what He had been allowed no share in directing. On the contrary, with a reverence chastened by long exile they began with the altar itself. Where else would they have begun and not blundered? This order of building has always prospered. Ambitions, plans, hopes even, waited upon praise and supplication, and more than half the first year was devoted to continuous sacrifice and petition. What years of bitter deprivation had taught them this dependence! But bitter sweetness let it be called, blessed bondage, to produce this wholesome fruit of reverence.

III. IN THE FORM OF THEIR WORSHIP THEY RETURNED SCRUPULOUSLY TO THE PATTERN ON THE MOUNT. They not only offered burnt-offerings, but they offered them "as it is written." They kept feasts by name not only, but in the way prescribed by the law of Moses. Their new moons and free-will offerings were those only that the Lord had consecrated in days past. This exact respect for the letter of the law shows how truly they appreciated the real cause of the national calamities. Every disaster since the days of Josiah had come from departing from the way of the Lord. A careless liberalism in worship had begotten a wicked license in the court and home life. It is one sign, therefore, that Judah's captivity was not in vain, that the first inquiry of the people after setting up the new altar was this, "How is it written to worship?" and a better sign, that they conformed to the Divine pattern as scrupulously as if it had come but yesterday from the flaming Mount. Many are the evils suspected of a too rigid adherence to the Divine command. But where has a nation or an individual been ruined by a too scrupulous obedience? Not too much conscience, but too little; not strictness, but license is the national danger. Hence great reforms sweeping over the land always drive the people back to the simpler living, the holier thinking, and the minuter obedience of the fathers. The despised writing of the past is reopened, the neglected pattern of the Mount is clothed with a new authority, and so men returning unto God find God returned to them.

IV. THE WORSHIP OF THE PEOPLE WAS ACCOMPANIED WITH THEIR GIFTS. "They gave money also unto the masons and to the carpenters," and their meat and drink and oil they exchanged for the sacred cedars of Lebanon. Surely, if any people might have found excuse for building on credit, they were these poor colonists, who had their burned cities to revive. They were building, too, for the future. Why should not the future share the cost? But these modern apologies for debt were then unknown. They remembered the story of the first tabernacle, the free-will offerings of their fathers and mothers. Something richer than cedar and brick must compose every true temple of worship. If the heart of the people, their love and devotion, are not built into the rising walls, they go up in vain; captivities are not in vain which thus revive the grace of self-sacrifice.

V. THE HOLY JOY WITH WHICH THEY FINALLY LAY THE FIRST STONE. With that stone an undisciplined people would have gone months before, but not these children of the captivity. There are spiritual foundations lower than the corner-stone of any temple, and these we have seen the people had been seven months in laying and seventy years in learning to lay—unity, reverence, obedience, and self-sacrifice. With a just and well-earned joy, therefore, they might lay on these settled foundations their first visible stone. It was not the joy of pride, for to themselves they took no praise. It was a tuneful joy, for they sang together by

course in praising and giving thanks to God. It was a hearty joy, for all the people shouted with a great shout. This holy jubilee marked the break of a new day in the history of Israel. Weeping had endured for a long night of seventy years. This was the joy of the morning, and the happy dawn was all the brighter for the shadows that lay behind it. The joy that follows discipline and is earned by repentance and obedience is perhaps the sweetest joy known to men in this world.

VI. THE HEALTHFUL SORROW AND REGRETS THAT TEMPERED THESE OUTBURSTS OF JOY. Undisciplined joy is sure to be giddy, but the joy of these returning exiles has in its sweet a dash of bitter, which saves it from hurtful excess. Many of the old men of the nation had seen the first house. They could not forget its glory. They remembered also, it may be, the impiety of their own days, and possibly of their own hearts, which hastened the nation's shame. Something of self-reproach must mingle with that regret. The new house bids fair to stand, for it is founded for use. No foolish display taints the plan. A mighty hunger after Jehovah impels them to make Him a dwelling-place in their midst. A Church thus rooted in real spiritual want comes near indeed to the true ideal of a spiritual home. Every attitude of the builders also is a propitiation of Jehovah. He will certainly accept their work, for their union is perfect; their reverence is simple, sincere; their obedience unforced; their self-sacrifice ungrudging. Here are the materials of all acceptable sacrifice. An altar built in this spirit will never want fire. (*Monday Club Sermons.*) *A working Church:*—1. All at work: "The people gathered themselves together." 2. All working in unison: "As one man." A massed force is a winning force. 3. All working obediently: "As it is written in the law." Christian activity not a sentiment but a duty. "To the law and the testimony." 4. All working unceasingly: "As the duty of every day required." The daily performance of Christian duty leaves no arrears. (*Willis S. Hinman.*) **And they set the altar upon his bases.**—*The altar set up:*—I. IN A NEW HOME THE FIRST THING THEY SHOULD DO WHO FEAR GOD IS TO SET UP AN ALTAR THERE. II. THE SERVICE OF THOSE WHO ARE OF ONE HEART IS WHAT HE TAKES PLEASURE IN (Acts ii. 1, iv. 32).

III. THE BEST OF DEFENCES IS THE FAVOUR OF GOD, AND SO AN ALTAR MAY BE A STRONGER BULWARK THAN A FORTRESS. (*E. Day.*) *The rebuilding of the altar: exemplary features of Divine worship:*—I. UNANIMITY AND ZEAL IN DIVINE WORSHIP. II. SACRIFICE IN DIVINE WORSHIP. This suggests—1. Man's need of atonement with God. 2. Man's duty of consecration to God. III. RESPECT FOR PRECEDENT IN DIVINE WORSHIP. There are memories and associations clinging around certain ancient forms and places hallowed by holy uses which greatly stimulate and enrich the devout heart. IV. CONFORMITY TO SCRIPTURE IN DIVINE WORSHIP. V. FEAR OF ENEMIES IN DIVINE WORSHIP. 1. The fear of enemies should not intimidate us from the worship of God. 2. The fear of enemies should impel us to worship God.

VI. REGULARITY IN DIVINE WORSHIP. The offering of the daily sacrifice suggests—1. Our daily need of atonement with God. 2. Our daily need of renewed consecration. 3. Our daily need of renewed blessings. (*William Jones.*) *Sacred to Jehovah:*—When a British vessel comes to an uninhabited country, or one inhabited only by savages, the captain goes on shore with a boat's crew, and, after landing, he unfurls the Union Jack and takes possession of the whole country in the name of Queen Victoria and his native land. He plants the flagstaff, and no foreign nation dare come and knock it down, or pull down the ensign of the power of Britain. So the priest built first the altar of sacrifice to show that the place was sacred to Jehovah, and that they and all the people were His servants. (*Sunday School.*) **They kept also the feast of tabernacles, as it is written.**—*Preparations for building:*—I. IT IS ONLY IGNORANT, SELF-SUFFICIENT PEOPLE WHO DESPISE THE EXPERIENCE OF THE PAST TREASURED UP IN HISTORY. II. IF WE CANNOT HAVE FOR GOD'S WORSHIP ALL THE EXTERNAL PROPRIETIES WE DESIRE, WE ARE NOT TO WAIT TILL WE CAN GET THEM. III. THE EXTERNALS OF WORSHIP ARE NOTHING TO GOD, EXCEPT SO FAR AS THEY INFLUENCE US OR ARE EXPRESSIVE OF SOMETHING IN US. (*E. Day.*) *The celebration of the sacred festivals resumed:*—I. THE COMMEMORATION IN DIVINE WORSHIP OF NATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND BLESSINGS. 1. It was a memorial of the emancipation of Israel from Egypt, teaching us that we should cherish the memory of former mercies (Lev. xxiii. 43). 2. It was a memorial of their life in the wilderness, reminding us that our present condition is that of strangers and pilgrims (Lev. xxiii. 40-43; Heb. xiii. 14). 3. It was a thanksgiving for rest and a settled abode in the promised land, suggesting the certainty and blessedness of the rest which remains for the people of God (Lev. xxiii. 40; Rev. vii. 9). 4. It was a thanksgiving for the completed harvest, teaching us to receive the precious

fruits of the earth as the kind gifts of a bountiful Providence (Exod. xxiii. 16; Lev. xxiii. 39; Deut. xvi. 13-15). II. THE CELEBRATION IN RELIGIOUS WORSHIP OF THE NATURAL DIVISIONS OF TIME. "And of the new moons." What was the design of this religious celebration of "the beginning of their months"? 1. To impress them with the value of time. 2. To assist them to form a correct estimate of their life upon earth. 3. To arouse them to make a wise use of the time which remained to them. III. THE PRESENTATION IN DIVINE WORSHIP OF PERSONAL VOLUNTARY OFFERINGS. (*William Jones.*)

Ver. 4. **As the duty of every day required.**—*The work of the day in the day*:—Time in the hands of many—I use the words of Solomon—is "a price in the hand of fools." They know not its value. It is in the margin, "the matter of the day in his day." This has grown into a proverbial saying among those who love Scripture phraseology; and teaches us that we should do the work of the day in the day. I. We may apply this to LIFE IN GENERAL. "To-day if ye will hear His voice harden not your heart." "Behold now is the day of salvation." "I must work the works of Him that sent Me while it is day; the night cometh wherein no man can work." II. It will apply to PROSPERITY. This is called a day, and Solomon tells us the duty of it, "In the day of prosperity be joyful." He cannot, we may be assured, intend to countenance extravagance or excess. Those men are to be pitied who possess much and enjoy little; who have the blessings of life in abundance but no heart to use them. These generally promise themselves great enjoyment hereafter when they have obtained so much. We should never sacrifice present happiness to future imaginations. God, like a generous friend, is pleased to see His presents enjoyed—"to enjoy is to obey." Another thing that the duty of this day requires is gratitude. The more you have received from God, the greater is your obligation to Him. And surely the duty of this day requires liberality. He had others in view as well as yourselves in all that He has done for you. III. It will apply to ADVERSITY. This also is called a day, and it is said, "In the day of adversity consider." You are to consider the alleviations of your suffering; how much worse it might have been; and to compare your resources with your difficulties. Another part of the duty of this day is submission. The duty of this day also requires prayer. "Call upon Me in the day of trouble." IV. We may apply it to THE SABBATH. This is called "the Lord's day," because it is consecrated to the memory of His resurrection, and is employed in His service. But as to advantage it is our day. It "was made for man." Such a season has peculiar claims upon us, and we are commanded "to sanctify it, calling the Sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord honourable; not doing our own ways, nor finding our own pleasure, nor speaking our own words." Can this be doing all the duty of the day? When once a regard for the Sabbath is gone everything serious goes with it. Have we to learn this? V. It will apply to EVERY DAY. No day comes without its appropriate duty. We are to be diligent in our respective callings. And not only so—but we are to do everything in its season; to do the work of the day in the day, and not leave it till to-morrow. 1. Because we may not live till to-morrow. "We know not what a day may bring forth." 2. Each day will have its own engagements; and it is wrong to surcharge one period with the additional work of another. 3. Because by this temporary negligence we have nothing to do, or too much; whereas by doing the work of the day in the day we are never unoccupied, never oppressed; we keep our affairs under easy management, and never suffer them to accumulate into a discouraging mass. 4. Because by this means the mind is kept cool, and tranquil, and cheerful; and we shall know nothing of the perplexities and ill-temper of those who are always in confusion and haste. To verify this important maxim let me lay down three rules. Rise early. Grasp not so much business as to "entangle yourselves in the affairs of this life." If you look abroad into the world you may be satisfied, at the first glance, that a vicious and infidel life is always a life of confusion. Thence it is natural to infer that order is friendly to religion. (*W. Jay.*) *The day's duty*:—That every day is enough for its own evil was a word of Jesus Christ. And there is another word that may be grafted on this. It is, that every day is enough for its own duty. It is suited to withdraw the thoughts from a vague futurity and collect them upon a space that can easily be surveyed, judged of, commanded. A day is one of the small circles of time. We can lay out its work though we cannot predict its fortunes. We can remember how it has been spent, whatever may have come to pass in it. It is capable of holding as much duty as our minds can

well compass. He who fills each of them well as they pass and are recorded, is wanting in nothing. We hear it often said that life is but a day. It is said to express the shortness of our stay upon the earth. It is said, for the most part, sorrowfully. Let us reverse it and say, with more striking truth, that each day is a life. Every day is a life fresh with reinstated power, setting out on its allotted labour and limited path. Its morning resembles a whole youth. Its eventide its sobering into age. It is rounded at either end by a sleep, unconsciousness at the outset and oblivion at the close. We are born again every time that the sun rises, and lights up the world for man to do his part in it. A day is a complete whole then; a finished piece. It had its tasks and toils, and they have been more or less faithfully gone through with. Or if they have been neglected quite it is too late to fulfil them now, for the opportunity has passed away. You may say, however, that it is by no means so entire, so much a thing by itself, as has now been represented. A day falls in among the accounts of time not as one of its separated fragments, but as strongly connected with portions of it that went before and are to follow. It is bound to the past which it continues. It is full of unfinished performances and projects that have nothing to do with the going down of the sun or the hour for the night's rest. All this is true of it. But is it not true also of life itself? A day is a life. It has all the elements in it of an entire being. It may be fair or foul. It may find us sick or well. But the soul is there that must create its own atmosphere, and that is often the healthiest when the pulses beat languidly and the flesh is in pain. The faculties are there that are to be exercised, and the affections that are to be kept in play. There an inward action is going on with all its responsibility. Again, a day is a life. We do not consider how much is contained within its rapid round. In describing its importance moralists and divines are apt to dwell principally on the uncertainty whether it may not be our last. And yet it would grow into great consequence in our eyes if we supposed that it was absolutely the whole. Reflect for an instant upon these two assertions. The narrow space that intervenes between your rising and your lying down does in the first place present the total sum, the full result of all your preceding experience. It is just what time and you have made it. Whatever you have observed, felt, done, there goes to the making up of what you are. The habits that you have been contracting, there reveal their strength. The dispositions that you cherish, there spread their thicknesses of deepening colour. A long action of forgotten days has been busy in forming to what it is the single day that has been rolling over you. You are prepared, then, to make a right estimate of the moral length of a day when you see it reaching back to infancy, and gathering upon itself the influences of a thousand facts of your history and emotions of your hearts, and reflecting a universe of truth and glory. And then consider further that it not only deserves so much from what is gone, but it extends itself forward also. It contains the germ of what is to be unfolded into far distant consequences. While it shows what the man has gradually become, it indicates with a warning finger what it is likely that he will be. Whatever one day is permitted to do with him, will probably continue to be done; if for good, going up to better: if for bad, going down to worse. The principles it exemplifies, the temper it displays, the bent of mind that traverses it, are not confined to its compass, and do not pass off with its date. Read that little leaf which is turned over so soon, and you may perceive that it is the book of your fate. We are thus brought to the practical application of the sentiment to which your attention has been directed. If a day is a life, let its work be done as its hours are passing. Let it have something of completeness in it. Men err in "despising those little ones." They love to send their thoughts over years and ages. They defer their good intentions to further periods. But these little ones are the chief of all if we will look at them as they are, and if we will make them what they should be. Think of what you have gained or lost in the account that all must render in at the last day. Remember how you have comported yourself towards those who love you and towards those who love you not. Remember what the currents of your inclination have been. Reflect whether the will has gone right, and the heart has been a true one, whatever else may have proved adverse or unjust. (*N. L. Frothingham.*) *A day*:—As the circuits of the earth round the sun give us the year and the seasons, and the revolutions of the moon round the earth our months, so the revolving of our earth on its axis marks out as the condition of human life that it should be divided into days and nights, and these are constituted alternate seasons of labour and repose. So life as a time for work resolves itself into a thing of days (*Psa. civ. 23*). I. LIFE BEING MADE UP

OF DAYS, THE CHARACTER AND COMPLEXION OF LIFE WILL DEPEND ON THE IMPROVEMENT OF DAYS AS THEY SUCCESSIVELY PASS BY. It is more easy to feel the importance of life as a whole, than to be duly impressed with the value of its smaller divisions. If the mind be set on improving life, its distribution into days offers to us many advantages for attaining this end. 1. A day is more easily brought within the grasp of the mind and planned for. 2. There is less difficulty in reviewing it and judging of its character. 3. Every day a new beginning is made and opportunity afforded for correcting to-day by the experience of yesterday. 4. Who can calculate the advantage of the freshness derived from sleep and the new vigour thus imported into life? (1) Physically. (2) Mentally. (3) Morally. The will is endued with new vigour as a man rises to a new day of life and activity.

II. THE DUTY WHICH EVERY DAY REQUIRES. Every day has its appropriate duty. 1. Some duties daily should terminate directly upon God. Such are prayer and praise. Who can tell what our needs may be, what accidents may happen, what decisions we may be called to take and what moral risks may be encountered? Daily petitions should therefore be offered. And how meet it is to mingle with daily petitioning thanksgiving for daily mercies. "Blessed be the Lord who daily loadeth us with benefits." 2. There is all the life-work. (1) The culture of the mind. (2) The business of each one's station. (3) Some direct service for the kingdom of Christ. This serves to hallow the day and to connect time the more distinctly with eternity. 3. Then there is the bearing of the burdens of the day.

III. THE WORK OF EACH DAY IS TO BE DONE, WITH ONLY A MODERATE THOUGHTFULNESS, YET WITHOUT PRESUMPTION AS TO THE MORROW AND DAYS TO COME. Christ discountenanced anxious forecasting as to the possibilities of the future. God is to be trusted to lay upon us burdens as He sees that we have strength, or as He will give strength to sustain them. Still less should there be presumption as to the future. Act as "in the living present," "as the matter of every day requires." "To-morrow," exclaimed a powerful French preacher once, "is the devil's word; God's word is to-day." "To-day, if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts." (*E. T. Prust.*)

Vers. 6-13. **From the first day of the seventh month began they to offer burnt-offerings unto the Lord.**—*The full establishment of religious services precedes the building of the temple:*—A weighty truth is enshrined in this apparently incongruous fact. The worship itself is felt to be more important than the house in which it is to be celebrated (*John iv. 21-24*). How vain is it, then, to treat the erection of churches as though it were a revival of religion! As surely as the empty seashell can never secrete a living organism to inherit it, a mere building—whether it be the most gorgeous cathedral or the plainest village meeting-house—will never induce a living spirit of worship to dwell in its cold desolation. Every true revival of religion begins in the spiritual sphere. (*Walter F. Adeney, M.A.*) **They gave money also unto the carpenters.**—*The preparations for rebuilding the temple:*—I. THE GREAT WORK YET TO BE ACCOMPLISHED. This illustrates—1. The incompleteness of human joys. 2. The incompleteness of human works. The altar was built, but the temple was not begun. The work of the earnest man is never accomplished. Even when death approaches, most men have much which they desire to accomplish. This incompleteness of our human works is also ordered wisely and well. It tends to prevent stagnation; to rouse to earnest activities, &c. 3. The obligation of the Church of God. The Jews at Jerusalem felt themselves bound not to rest content with the joys and blessings of the altar, but to proceed to the more arduous task of rebuilding the temple. II. THE PROMPT PREPARATIONS FOR THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF THIS WORK. Two points claim attention—1. The variety of service and the unity of design. 2. The co-operation of Jews and Gentiles. Conclusion—1. Are we "as living stones built up" in the spiritual temple of God? (1 *Pet. ii. 4-6*). 2. Are we also assisting to build this glorious temple? (1 *Cor. iii. 10-15*). (*William Jones.*) *The building of the temple:*—I. THAT DIFFICULTIES OUGHT NOT TO DISCOURAGE US IN THE LORD'S WORK. Paucity of numbers and feebleness of resources. Enemies. II. THE READINESS OF THE PEOPLE TO GIVE OF THEIR MEANS UNTO THE LORD (*Ezra ii. 68, 69*). Their first care was the house of God. Without homes of their own, their cities in ruins, with a thousand demands pressing upon them, they nevertheless provided first of all for the worship of the temple. How needful the lesson! God's house before our own. God first and afterward self. This work first, and then our own. 1. They offered willingly. It was not the tithe which they were required by law to give. It was a

free-will offering to God, and hence all the more acceptable (2 Cor. ix. 7). 2. They gave according to their ability. Proportionate giving as God has prospered us is one of the most pressing needs of the Church to-day. It is a duty as plainly enjoined as prayer and praise (Deut. xvi. 17; 1 Cor. xvi. 2). III. THE PEOPLE WERE READY TO WORK AS WELL AS GIVE. The Church needs willing workers even more than generous givers. Hearts and hands are always worth more than gold and silver. 1. They worked unitedly. The people laboured "as one" (margin). Their counsels were not divided. There were no jealousies, no personal ambitions to hinder the progress of the undertaking. 2. The work was systematically prosecuted. Zeal and energy were displayed, but without making them substitutes for intelligence and adaptation. One of the great needs of God's people is appreciation of the advantages of systematic work. IV. THANKFUL JOY IN THE LORD'S SERVICE. The ancient men wept with a loud voice as they saw the foundation of the new house laid. Yet, after all, their weeping may have had nothing in it of the spirit of murmuring. Tears are oftentimes expressive of the deepest joy.

"There's not a string attuned to mirth
But has its chord in melancholy."

The joy that is touched with pain is the noblest of joys. The sweetest music is written in the minor key. Possibly the noise of their weeping was more grateful to God than the shouts of their younger companions. (*Rufus S. Green, D.D.*) The second temple:—I. THE BUILDING OF THIS TEMPLE WAS A VISIBLE AND ABIDING TESTIMONY TO MAN'S FIRM FAITH IN THE EXISTENCE AND POWER OF THE GOD OF HEAVEN. "The mystery of holy shrines," says Kinglake, "lies deep in human nature. However the more spiritual minds may be able to rise and soar, the common man, during his mortal career, is tethered to the globe that is his appointed dwelling-place; and the more his affections are pure and holy, the more they seem to blend with some sacred spot, that belongs to the outward and visible world." Temples tell us of one who is invisible. As Jacob set up an altar in the place where God talked with him and called the name of the place Bethel, so always men have erected memorial stones to commemorate their faith in God. II. THE TEMPLES AND ALTARS WHICH MAN BUILDS SIGNIFY A DESIRE ON HIS PART FOR NEARER AND MORE CONSTANT COMMUNION WITH GOD. From the first God had revealed Himself as One who was ready to meet with His people, to draw aside the veil, at least in part, and commune with them from off the holy place. Outside the walls of Eden He appeared above the altar of Abel. Whenever, in later times, the patriarchs set up an altar and called on the name of the Lord, they expected that He would come and sanctify the spot by His presence. They were not disappointed. Enoch walked with Him; Noah built an ark under His direction; Abraham saw His day; to Jacob He appeared again and again; He talked with Moses and showed His glory to Isaiah; Elijah's altar was touched with fire; to the whole people He showed a pillar of cloud and flame, and commanded them, saying, "Let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them," and when it was finished, the shekinah appeared, God dwelt in the Holy of holies, and from off the fiery seat talked with His prophets and priests. Although under the Christian dispensation the idea of communion with God is ennobled, and the fellowship made more exalted and spiritual, so that Jesus Christ is now our true sanctuary and passover, still the old conception is not altogether abandoned. While the veil of the temple is rent in twain and every common bush is aflame with God, still there is a special blessing for those who meet together in the sanctuary. The place of worship is correctly spoken of as the "meeting-house," the meeting-house where man comes to meet his God. III. THE CONDUCT OF THESE TEMPLE BUILDERS INDICATES DETERMINATION AND SELF-SACRIFICE. (*Sermons by Monday Club.*)

Vers. 11-13. And they sang together by course.—*Religious feeling prompts to praise*:—During the persecution in Madagascar, a number of native Christians would assemble at midnight in the house of the missionary for religious instruction. On one occasion they said, "Mr. Ellis, we must sing." "No," said he, "it is as much as your lives are worth to be heard." They continued to talk about the love of Christ, and then exclaimed again, "Sing we must." He cautioned them, and they added, "We will sing in a whisper." So on their bended knees they quietly sang a hymn. "But I could only weep," said the missionary, who knew their peril. (*Sunday Companion.*) *Building for God's praise*:—During the months

that St. Francis went up and down the streets of Assisi, carrying in his delicate hands the stones for rebuilding the St. Damiano Chapel, he was continually singing psalms, breaking forth into ejaculations of gratitude, his face beaming as one who saw visions of unspeakable delight. When questioned why he sang he replied, "I build for God's praise, and desire that every stone should be laid with joy." (*H. O. Mackey.*) **Who had seen the first house.**—*Declensions in religion observed and lamented*.—The first and second temple may be considered as expressive of the state of real and substantial godliness in our own land, in two ages not much more distant from each other than those were in which these two temples stood. What I purpose is to point out some of those articles respecting the first and second compared, which seem most applicable to the end I have in view. I. THAT THE FIRST AND SECOND TEMPLES WERE BUILT IN THE SAME PLACE, HAD NEARLY THE SAME FOUNDATION, AND WERE BOTH RAISED WITH THE SAME DESIGN. The temple which we raise and that which our forefathers saw, are built on "the foundation of the apostles and prophets; Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner-stone." We have the same Gospel, the same Saviour, and the same precious Agent is employed for conversion, edification, support and comfort. II. THAT THE FIRST HOUSE SURPASSED THE SECOND, AS IT WAS MADE OF MORE GOODLY MATERIALS AND WAS BUILT ON A NOBLER PLAN. Whilst we are built on the same foundation as our fathers we are less perfect in the eyes of God than they—we have less dignity of character in the various relations of life—we are less fit to become the habitation of God. It is to be feared that we have less divine knowledge than those in the past; that the ways, works, and word of God are less studied with a design to amend and purify the heart, and that those ordinances are more neglected now than they once were which have the most apparent tendency to carry on a work of grace and piety. Our graces are defective. We are too apt to rest in present attainments. Our fathers seem to have excelled us in a determined opposition to sin—in a weanedness from this world—and in a spiritual, holy, heavenly walk. We seem less in earnest than they in the cultivation of those things that improve, enlarge, and ennoble the soul, and that stamp a dignity on human nature. III. THAT THE FIRST HOUSE EXCEEDED THE SECOND, IN THE MANNER OF ITS DEDICATION. The temple we raise is dedicated to God. How far this dedication falls short of that which our fathers made is not easy to say. There seems to have been no sacrifice which the apostles and martyrs were not willing to make; and they seemed to conceive of themselves as sacred to God. We are sprung from those who in their day were examples of devotedness to God, and who carried with them this persuasion that the temple of God should be holy, whose temple they were. Ancient men remember the dedication they made, the correspondence there was between their lives and that dedication, and the degree in which "holiness to the Lord" was inscribed upon them. We of the present generation seem to be making a more partial dedication to Him than our fathers made. Multitudes among us seem to be trying to "serve two masters." It is alas! too apparent from the thoughts with which we begin and close the day—from the desires and passions that possess our minds through the hours of it—and from the nature of objects which we eagerly pursue, that we are not so exemplary in devotedness to God as many in past ages have been. The progress of a worldly spirit is visible among us; the great objects of religion are not habitually thought so amiable, important, and venerable by us as by the last generation of the people of God; nor is our regard to God, to Christ, and eternity so commanding a principle as it appears formerly to have been. Knowledge cannot so easily be taken of us that we have been with Jesus; nor can I think that we stand among men, like temples built for God and consecrated to Him as they did. IV. THAT THE FIRST TEMPLE SURPASSED THE SECOND, ON ACCOUNT OF THAT HOLY FIRE BURNING WITHIN, WHICH PROCEEDED FROM GOD. They from whom we are descended were eminently devout, the holy fire, the fervour of devotion which attended their offerings and sacrifices rendered them through Christ highly acceptable to God. They were mighty in prayer. Those who never prayed themselves remarked their devotion. Their closets, their families, some social band and the house of God could witness their communion with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ; their pious breathings of soul—the holy ardour of their spirit—and that pleasure, that improvement and lustre they derived from thence. The friends of the Church and their country sought an interest in their prayers. I dare not say that the devout among us are as numerous as they have ever been, or that the sacred fire of devotion burns now as bright and strong in the breasts of professors as it hath ever done. Ancient men may remember when there was more apparent devotion in our public assemblies—

when more preparation was made for a profitable attendance there—when family worship, reading the Scriptures, and praying was more general among professors—when private devotion was made a more serious business, and when more schemes were entered upon and vigorously pursued to maintain and transmit a spirit of piety and devotion in societies and the world. Some professors content themselves with praying in their families once a day, others once in the week, and many without praying at all. Devotion is one grand instrument in the increase of faith; in strengthening the hand and encouraging the heart in the service of God and our generation; in lightening all the burdens and afflictions of life, in forming the inhabitants of earth to a resemblance of those in heaven, and in drawing down the blessings of God. V. THAT THE FIRST TEMPLE EXCEEDED THE SECOND IN THE CLOUD OF GLORY, THAT AMAZING SYMBOL OF THE DIVINE PRESENCE. God is present with His Church in every age; but in different ages, and in the same age in different places, His presence and glory have been manifested in different degrees. Where there is a spirit of prayer and supplication poured forth; where the house and ordinances of God are frequented with a high relish and growing profit; and where benevolent and pious sentiments, affections, and passions are alive in the soul; there God is in an eminent degree. That the presence and glory of God are not seen in our temple as in that which ancient men and chief of the fathers remember, is, I fear, but too true. With respect to some places, it can only be said, "Here God once dwelt"; and in some others that are still frequented, a certain languor and coldness attend the worship which the manifestation of the presence and glory of God would have removed. (*N. Hill.*) **Wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy.**—*The same events may be a cause for joy and a cause for sorrow.*—The name of Ezra, which signifies a helper, is strikingly illustrated in the character which this excellent man sustained. He was pre-eminently so to the Jews just about the period of their return from the Chaldean captivity. He stirred up the spirits of many to engage with him in this sacred employment; he devoted much of his talents, of his time, of his substance, and of his labours to the work; he occupied himself in rectifying and reforming many of the civil, political, and ecclesiastical abuses. Ask yourselves whether you sustain that character in a religious sense which Ezra so admirably bore? Have none of you proved hindrances instead of helpers in the work of God? Have none of you endeavoured to impede the religious procedures of those by whom you are surrounded—in your families, or in the circle in which you move, or in your neighbourhood, or in the Church, or in the world? The immediate reference in the language is, the set time which God had appointed to favour Zion had come. Israel had now to be delivered from the bondage beneath which it had for many years languished. The circumstance which is stated here is very remarkable. It seems that when the foundations of the house were laid the younger persons in the congregation of the people shouted aloud for joy; on the other hand, there were certain hoary-headed men, called here "the ancient men," who wept aloud upon the occasion. There is no censure here implied; I should rather commend them for their tears. And I purpose to show you that there often exists in connection with the very same events cause for joy and cause for sorrow. I. First in reference to THE FACT WHICH IS HERE STATED CONCERNING THE JEWS. We are told that the younger persons shouted for joy when the foundations of the house of God were laid, and the elder among them wept for sorrow. Jeremiah predicted that this would be actually the case (*Jer. xxxiii. 10, 11*). What was there in this event to inspire joy? I answer four things. 1. First of all, the rise of this temple was a proof in itself that the fierceness of God's anger had been turned away, and that He was now about to show mercy to His people. For a long time they had been deprived of their temple, of their altar, and of the institution of the most high God. They languished beneath His frown, but although He had punished them for their backslidings He had not utterly cast away the people whom He foreknew. 2. In the second place, now they had a prospect of enjoying an opportunity of attending on the public ordinances of God's house. For a long time they had been scattered; the truly penitent among them had their private devotions by the banks of Kebar, and by the Euphrates they had wept when they remembered Zion, but they had no opportunity to convene themselves together to celebrate the ordinances to which they had been previously accustomed. 3. There was a third reason, too, and that respected the display of the power and of the truth of God. Here was a display of His truth in the actual fulfilment of the prediction of His word, and here was likewise an exhibition of His almighty power which had surmounted a

variety of obstacles to the accomplishment of the important work. 4. Lastly, joy was natural on the present occasion because of the happy influence which this event would have on the interests of religion at large. What evidence was here given of the accomplishment of the promise of God illustrating His veracity and other of His perfections! What new facilities were now opened for the instruction of the ignorant, for the conversion of the souls of sinners to God! What a favourable opinion was likely to be produced on the minds of the heathen themselves when they saw the wonders which God had wrought for His chosen people (Ezek. xxxvii. 24; Jer. xxxiii. 9). Now what was there in association with this procedure that was likely to awaken sorrow? There was much which justified the feelings of those excellent men who wept so that the noise of the weeping was heard afar off. For they could not but remember that it was in consequence of their backsliding from God that they had been so long suffering under religious deprivations; and there is something in the reminiscences of sin which will always produce some bitterness of feeling. Moreover they recollected the magnificence of the former temple; they could not but mourn when they contrasted the two structures. Venerable men, there was much worthy of their tears! There is a justifiable difference between the pleasurable joys of youth and age; in youth the passions are warm, health is usually vigorous, life is clothed in all its scenes which are yet to open with the freshness and beauty of novelty. Inexperience, too, disqualifies for a due consideration of those alloys which are always the companions of terrestrial delights. On the contrary, the ancient man is sobered by time, his feelings are mellowed by experience and observation. He is aware of much that will infallibly arise in a world of infirmity and imperfection like this to embitter the choicest pleasures, and consequently there is more of seriousness in the old man's joy and less of ecstasy. We therefore eulogise those old men for their religious tears. They had no intention of damping the joys of those around them; they had no intention of diverting the ardent zeal of those who shouted for joy when the foundations of God's temple were laid. II. I ILLUSTRATE THE HISTORY AND THE SENTIMENT WHICH I DERIVE FROM

IT IN CONNECTION WITH A VARIETY OF FACTS WHICH WILL BE FOUND EXISTING IN OUR CHURCHES, IN OUR FAMILIES, IN OUR CIRCLES, AND LIKEWISE IN THE WORLD AT LARGE, POINTING OUR REMARKS CHIEFLY AT PERSONAL EXPERIENCE. 1. First of all we may apply the statement before us to the diffusion of the truths of revelation and of Christianity throughout the world in which we live. Unquestionably we have cause for gratitude when we reflect upon what has been accomplished by British Christians within the last forty years. We are building a temple which shall gradually rise to a holy building in the Lord, and the top of which, the pinnacle, shall pierce the very heavens. But when we compare all these diversified exertions with the immense population of the world who are still destitute of the privileges of Christianity, the contrast abates our pleasures, for it is no more than the small drop of the bucket compared to the ocean, than a spark of fire or the kindling lamp to the sun which shines in the firmament. 2. However, the principles we have drawn from this passage may be applied to the various exertions of zeal in the days in which we live. We cannot but mourn over the lamentable apathy in reference to public religious interests which a considerable number of our forefathers and of our ancestors displayed. But what a change has taken place—for one institution that was established then for the benefit of the various classes of mankind, there are actually hundreds existing in our land. Surely, then, it behoves us to exclaim, "Come, magnify the Lord, and let us exalt His name together." But honesty and fidelity must compel us to say also that there are abatements of our pleasures even in connection with this delightful subject. For I ask whether we are not sometimes driving ourselves into the opposite extreme which draws us away from our family altars and closet religion, or at least subjects them to much hurry and confusion? I ask, too, whether there are not some things in connection with our religious procedures which should be carefully avoided—pomp, and vanity, and ostentation, and display? I ask whether there are not passing even at the present hour, lamentable contentions and strifes in connection with some of our noblest Christian institutions? 3. The principle before us would apply likewise to the religious aspect of things in your family and in your circle. Well may you exclaim, "We have no greater joy than to see our children walking in the truth." But oh, is there no abatement to this pleasure? Is there no daughter who by her irreligion, her levity, and her folly, is the grief of her father and of her mother who bore her? Christian masters and mistresses, it may be that you have taught your servants and inmates to know the way of God, and there are some of them walking

in His commandments and in His ordinances blameless; there are others who are evidently irreligious and living without God in the world. III. Once more, however, and to bring our remarks to personal experience, THE PRINCIPLE OR SENTIMENT WE HAVE DRAWN FROM THIS PASSAGE MAY BE FOUND APPLICABLE TO THE STATE OF RELIGION IN YOUR OWN SOULS. My Christian friends, compare your former and your latter state. Time was when you were all darkness. But one thing you know, that whereas you were once blind, now you see—see the evil of sin, see the excellence of the Saviour. And does not all this demand a song and an ascription of praise? Is not this event the result of the mercy of God which endureth for ever? And yet I make another appeal to you, whether even amidst all the joys there is much which should make you walk humbly before God, much which not unfrequently extorts from you the cry, “Oh, wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” Does not all this awaken painful regrets? Now let me say that this combination of joy and sorrow in the bosom of a believer is perfectly congenial and compatible. Professed humility, the habitual exercise of penitence for sin, and a joy unutterable and full of glory, may exist together in the bosom of those who are converted and sanctified by the grace of God. You have much to deplore, much that is to be removed, much that is to be accomplished; yet we would prevent you from indulging too much depression, we would tell you that the little leaven shall leaven the whole lump. Oh, yes! He that has begun the good work in you shall perform it till the day of Jesus Christ; and though powerful obstructions may again rise up to hinder the erection of this building which you are rearing, the top stone shall at last be brought forth with shoutings of grace, grace unto it. And soon the conflict shall be over, the enterprise shall be complete, and you, like the returned children of the captivity, shall settle down in a better country, even the heavenly, which shall be your permanent abode, where there shall be no admixture of pain. (*J. Clayton.*) *The shouts and weeping of a day of jubilee*:—It is worth while noticing that while the old men’s grateful tears honoured their God as really as the young men’s shouts of praise, yet that these last were after all the truest to the fact, for that whilst to the eyes of those who had seen the house in her past glory this house was in comparison as nothing, yet that to the opened glance of God’s prophet it was even now revealed that “the glory of this latter house should be greater than that of the former.” At such a time pure exultation and absolute dejection are alike out of place. Shouts of joy which pass into sobs and tears, which tell of humbled but grateful recollection, are the meekest temper in which we can present before our God our best offerings. If, then, this be the right temper for our minds, it must be a proper time for us to mark some of the chief imperfections which have hindered our service, as well as some of those brighter features which may at once fill our hearts with hope and help to direct us in our further course. I. First, then, for SOME OF THE LEADING IMPERFECTIONS OF OUR WORK. 1. Now in entering upon this subject of the imperfections of our services, I may say at once, in the first place, that a work which is so much as this is, the coming forth of the Church’s inner spiritual life, must, by the inevitable laws of the kingdom of grace, bear about it marks of the sins and infirmities which at the time weaken the spiritual life of the Church. We shall therefore surely find repeated in this our work the transcript of our own besetting sins; our secularity, our love of ease, our want of self-denial, our low estimate or unbelief of the spiritual character and power of Christ’s Church, our indistinct apprehensions of her distinctive doctrines, our low sense of “the power of the Cross of Christ and of the indwelling of God the Holy Ghost in His regenerate people, our want of love to Christ, our weak faith, our fainting love to our brethren. But to use this truth most practically let us endeavour to see in detail some of the special forms of weakness in which our own spiritual evils have in fact made themselves manifest. And first among these, how scanty has our work been when weighed against our opportunities. Where are nations born through us into the faith? Where is there not the same sight?—a little work done, feeble and divided efforts blest far above their deserving, but still effecting little against the mass of evil. Next, how late was our service! And then to note but one more mark of imperfection and instrument of weakness, how have our services lacked, alas! how do they still lack, that grace of unity, with which more perhaps than with any other condition, both in the Word of God and in the experience of the Church, any great success in the evangelisation of the world has always been connected! Who can estimate the measure in which these, our sinful strifes, banish from us the indwelling strength of the ever-blessed Spirit of unity?

Who can limit the success which might accompany His working, even by our feeble hands, if there were but restored to us the gift of a true brotherly union and concord? II. AND YET WITH THAT SOUND OF WEEPING SHOULD THERE NOT BE FOR US ALSO VOICES OF MEN THAT SHOUT FOR JOY? For too scanty as our work is, compared with what it should be, yet is it in itself great, real, and increasing. Late as we began it, yet for three half centuries has God received from us its thankful offering. It is no little thing to have been enabled to plant the Church of Christ throughout North America. It is no light blessing to have been permitted to accompany everywhere throughout the world England's too irreligious colonisation with the blessed seed of the Church's life, so that even for the extent of our work with all its scantiness we may indeed bless God. And for our last and greatest imperfection, for our own separations, many as are still, alas! our divisions, yet are marks of unity appearing and increasing with us. How full of hope and humble joy is this day's new and glorious sight? Surely it is written for us to-day, "Rejoice, thou barren, that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband." But then once more there is here matter for our future guidance, as well as for our present joy. Such gifts of God as those which are this day poured out upon us must not only be received with thankfulness, they must also be used with diligence. They are cheering mercies, but they are also stirring calls to duty. (*Bp. Samuel Wilberforce.*)

CHAPTER IV.

VERS. 1-3. Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard.—*The proposal of the Samaritans to the Jews*:—I. THE PROPOSAL MADE BY THE SAMARITANS.

1. Plausible in its form. 2. But evil in itself. (1) They were not Israelites. (2) They did not worship Jehovah as the true God. To have received such a people into community and co-operation with the true people of God would have been an act of utter unfaithfulness and disloyalty to Him. (3) Their design in making this proposal was an unworthy one. (4) The acceptance of their proposal would have been perilous to the Jews. II. THE PROPOSAL REJECTED BY THE JEWS. 1. An exclusive obligation in relation to the work is asserted. The alleged similarity of worship is indirectly denied. 3. The command of Cyrus is adduced in support of this rejection. This was prudent. "Be ye wise as serpents," &c. 4. The rejection of the proposal was unanimous. 5. The rejection of the proposal was prompt and decided. (*William Jones.*) *The proposals of the wicked and how to treat them*:—I. THAT THE WICKED OFTEN PROPOSE TO ENTER INTO ALLIANCE WITH THE GOOD. These alliances are of different kinds. 1. Commercial. 2. Social

3. Matrimonial. 4. Religious. II. THAT THE PROPOSALS OF THE WICKED FOR ALLIANCE WITH THE GOOD ARE OFTEN SUPPORTED BY PLAUSIBLE REASONS. III. THAT THE ALLIANCES PROPOSED BY THE WICKED ARE ALWAYS PERILOUS TO THE GOOD. IV. THAT THE PROPOSALS OF THE WICKED FOR ALLIANCE WITH THE GOOD SHOULD ALWAYS BE FIRMLY REJECTED. (*Ibid.*) *The uses of an enemy*:—1. The having one is proof that you are somebody. Wishy-washy, empty, worthless people, never have enemies. Men who never move, never run against anything; and when a man is thoroughly dead and utterly buried, nothing ever runs against him. To be run against, is proof of existence and position; to run against something, is proof of motion. 2. An enemy is, to say the least, not partial to you. He will not flatter. He will not exaggerate your virtues. It is very probable that he will slightly magnify your faults. The benefit of that is twofold. It permits you to know that you have faults; it makes them visible and so manageable. Your enemy does for you this valuable work. 3. In addition, your enemy keeps you wide awake. He does not let you sleep at your post. There are two that always keep watch—namely, the lover and the hater. Your lover watches that you may sleep. He keeps off noises, excludes light, adjusts surroundings, that nothing may disturb you. Your hater watches that you may not sleep. He stirs you up when you are napping. He keeps your faculties on the alert. 4. He is a detective among your friends. You need to know who your friends are, and who are not, and who are your enemies. The last of these three will discriminate the other two. When your enemy goes to one who is neither friend nor enemy, and assails you, the indifferent one will have

nothing to say or chime in, not because he is your enemy, but because it is so much easier to assent than to oppose, and especially than to refute. But your friend will take up cudgels for you on the instant. He will deny everything and insist on proof, and proving is very hard work. Follow your enemy and you will find your friends, for he will have developed them so that they cannot be mistaken. The next best thing to having a hundred real friends, is to have one open enemy. (C. F. Deems, D.D.) *The adversary an abiding quantity in life*:—The adversary is a man who seeks to discover flaws, disadvantages, mistakes; a man who magnifies all that is unworthy until he makes a great sore and wound of it, so as to offend as many as possible; he knows how the work could have been better done; he sees where every mistake has been committed; and under his breath, or above it, as circumstances may suggest, he curses the builders and their building, and thinks that such an edifice built by such men is but an incubus which the earth is doomed to bear. Regard the criticism of adversaries as inevitable. If we think of it only as incidental, occasional, characteristic of a moment's experience, we shall treat it too lightly; the adversary is an abiding quantity in life. (J. Parker, D.D.) *Let us build with you.*—*Beware of your associates*:—Beware of your associates. With some men we ought not to build even God's house. We may spoil the sacred edifice by taking money made by the ruin of men. The Samaritans who thus spoke to Zerubbabel and to the chief of the fathers were not telling an absolute lie. No absolute lie can ever do much in the world; its very nakedness would cause it to be driven out of society; it must wear some rag of truth. The Samaritans in the ancient time did worship God after their fashion, but they did not give up a single idolatrous practice; they wanted to have two religions—to serve in some sort all the gods there were, and then when one failed they could flee to another; so they would build any wall, any altar, any city, any sanctuary; they wanted to be at peace with all the gods, then they would know what to do in the day of adversity. We have spoken of the Samaritans of the ancient time: why not speak of the Samaritans of the present day who wish to do this very thing—men who can bow their heads in prayer, and drink toasts to the devil? "Ye cannot serve God and Mammon." (*Ibid.*) *Simulated unselfishness*:—How oftentimes are people overcome by manner, by persuasiveness of tone, by assumed gentleness of spirit! The young creature is often so overcome; she says she knows he who has spoken to her is not a bad man; whatever he be he has a guileless tongue; his words are well chosen; he speaks them as a man might speak them who knows the gentleness of pity, all the sympathy of love; it is impossible that he can be simulating such tenderness; it is impossible that he can for selfish reasons be putting himself to such inconvenience and sacrifice. It is to-morrow that she finds out that beneath the velvet there lay the claw of the tiger. Nothing stands but character—real, simple, transparent, solid character. That will bear a thousand blasts of opposition and hostility, and at the end will seem the richer, the chaster, for the rude discipline through which it has passed. (*Ibid.*) *The true builders of the spiritual temple of God*:—That Christian work should be done only by Christians may be supported by the following reasons. I. THEY ALONE WILL BUILD ON THE TRUE FOUNDATION. II. THEY ALONE WILL BUILD WITH THE TRUE MATERIALS. III. THEY ALONE WILL BUILD IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE TRUE PLAN. IV. THEY ALONE WILL BUILD WITH THE TRUE AIM. This is the glory of God. V. THEY ALONE WILL BUILD IN THE TRUE SPIRIT. That of—1. Obedience. 2. Humility. 3. Patience. 4. Trust in God. 5. Self-consecration. (William Jones.) *Compromising help refused*:—How strangely history repeats itself. In this early struggle between the Jews and the Samaritans we have a foreshadow of many a struggle in the Christian Church. When Paul and the other apostles went forth preaching the Gospel, the Greeks and the Romans would willingly enough have tolerated Christianity if Christianity would but tolerate their idolatrous systems. They would even have patronised the new religion, and would have offered no opposition to the erection of an image of Jesus amongst the images of other gods. But, when they saw that Christianity demanded the renouncing of idolatry and the exclusive worship of the one living and true God, at once priests, rulers, and people rose in arms against the preachers. Every obstacle was placed in the way of the spread of Christianity. But in spite of all persecution the Church prospered. Idolatry fought for its life and gradually lost every battle, until, in the fourth and fifth centuries, the Gospel had conquered the Roman Empire, and Christianity became the nominal religion of all her people. This is the battle, too, that the Church has to fight to-day. We can and we ought to be liberal in many things, but the followers of Jesus dare not

be so liberal as to allow men of the world and men of sin to engage hand in hand with them in the Master's work. The Church ought, and she does, invite into her fellowship all classes. However fallen and bad men may be they are welcome to enter the Church. But they must leave the world and their sins behind them. There cannot be two masters. Christ must have the whole heart, the whole strength, and the entire devotion. (*J. Menzies.*) *Questionable money help should be refused*.—The Church will take money from anybody; the whole Christian Church in all her ramifications and communions cheats herself into the persuasion that she can take the money of bad men and turn it to good uses. Grandeur would be the Church, more virgin in her beauty and loveliness, more snow-like in her incorruptibleness, if she could say to every bad man who offers her assistance, Ye have nothing to do with us in building the house of our God: the windows shall remain unglazed, and the roof-beams unslated, before we will touch money made by the sale of poison or by practices that are marked by the utmost corruption and evil. (*J. Parker, D.D.*) *Doubtful men a source of weakness to a church*.—Thus we can learn from the Old Testament a good deal that would bear immediate modern application. This is the right answer to all doubtful Christians as well as to all unbelievers. We should say to them, So long as you are doubtful you are not helpful: your character is gone on one side, and therefore it is ineffective on the other. But would not this class of discipline and scope of criticism shear down the congregations? Certainly. Would God they were shorn down! Every doubtful man amongst us is a loss, a source of weakness, a point of perplexity and vexation. We are only unanimous when we are one in moral faith and consent. The critic will do us no good; the clever man who sees our metaphysical error will keep us back: only the soul that has given itself to Christ, out-and-out, in an unbargaining surrender, can really stand fire in the great war, and build through all weathers, and hope even in the midst of darkness. We may have too many people round about us; we may be overburdened and obstructed by numbers. The Church owes not a little of its strength to the purity of its discipline. (*Ibid.*) *Mental penetration in leaders*.—Leaders must be critical. The man who has little responsibility can soon achieve a reputation for energy. Leaders must halt, hesitate, balance, and compare things, and come to conclusions supported by the largest inferences. There are men who would take a short and ready method in accomplishing their purpose: there are men of rude strength, of undisciplined and unsanctified force. But Zerubbabel and Jeshua must look at all the offers of assistance, and ask what their real value is; they must go into the sanctuary of motive, into the arcana of purpose and under-meanings. Zerubbabel and Jeshua—men who could undertake to build a city—were men who had mental penetration; they could see into other men. They saw into the Samaritan adversaries, and said, "Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God." (*Ibid.*)

Vers. 4-24. **Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah.**—*The hostility of the Samaritans to the Jews*.—I. THE TACTICS OF THE WICKED. If they cannot bend the good to their wishes and aims by plausible pretences, they alter their tactics and betake themselves to unscrupulous opposition in various forms. II. THE VENALITY OF THE WICKED. The Samaritans "hired counsellors against them, to frustrate their purposes." It is reasonable to infer that these counsellors were men of some skill and resource and power of persuasion who deliberately exercised their abilities in an evil cause for gain. III. THE TEMPORARY TRIUMPH OF THE WICKED. IV. THE FREEDOM ALLOWED BY GOD TO THE WICKED. (*William Jones.*) *The antagonism of the world to the Church*.—This antagonism as here illustrated is—I. PERSISTENT. II. AUTHORITATIVE. III. COMBINED. IV. UNSCRUPULOUS. V. PLAUSIBLE. 1. In their profession of loyalty to the king. 2. In their presentation of proof of their assertions. (*Ibid.*)

Ver. 14. **Now because we have maintenance from the king's palace.**—*Good cause for great zeal*.—I. WE ACKNOWLEDGE A VERY GRACIOUS FACT. 1. We have been maintained from the King's palace—(1) In things temporal. (2) In things spiritual. 2. Our maintenance from the King's palace has cost His Majesty dear. He spared not His own Son. 3. We have had a bountiful supply. 4. We have had an unfailing portion. 5. The supply has ennobled us. 6. How cheering it is to have such a soul-satisfying portion in God. II. HERE IS A DUTY RECOGNISED. By every sense of propriety we are bound not to see God dishonoured—1. By ourselves. 2. By those who dwell under our roof. 3. By those with whom we have influence;

particularly those who desire to unite with us in Church fellowship. We must not receive into our membership persons of unhallowed life—those who know not the truth as it is in Jesus. 4. By the mutilation and misrepresentation of His Word. 5. By a neglect of His ordinances. 6. By a general decline of His Church. 7. By so many rejecting His gospel. We cannot prevent their doing so, but we can weep for them, pray for them, &c. III. A COURSE OF ACTION PURSUED. "Certified the king." It is a holy exercise of the saints to report to the Lord the sins and the sorrows they observe among the people and to plead for their removal. (C. H. Spurgeon.)

Ver. 15. **That search may be made in the book of the records of thy fathers.** *Church registers* :—In a general view, all human records are interesting, if they are scarcely more than registers of names. Those names are always appended to some act or event, however concisely stated, and thus these mere catalogues serve to show us how they who have gone before us have been occupied, and are the founts and rills which flow into the great stream of human history; or, rather perhaps, to change the metaphor, are among the foundation-stones on which the fabric of human history is reared; they are low and concealed from observation, but are nevertheless essential to the building. Nothing can be apparently more devoid of interest than the pages of a church register; and yet, let us look at it nearly and intently, and with a reference to the principle just intimated, and interest will be found in every column, in every name. Consider—I. The register of BAPTISMS. II. The register of MARRIAGES. III. The register of DEATHS. (F. W. P. Greenwood.)

Vers. 17-24.—**Then sent the king an answer.**—*The temporary triumph of the wicked* :—I. EXAMINE THE LETTER OF THE KING. This letter suggests—1. That the subtlety of the wicked frequently obtains a temporary triumph over the good. 2. That one generation frequently suffers through the sins of another and earlier one. The Jews smarted for their sins of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah. 3. That the cause of God is frequently reproached and hindered by the evil conduct of some of its adherents. The rebellions of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah were now made use of to asperse the Jews and to stop the work of God. All who love the gospel should therefore walk circumspectly. II. THE ACTION OF THE SAMARITANS. "Now when the copy of king Artaxerxes' letter was read," &c. Their action was—1. Prompt. 2. Personal. 3. Powerful. Learn: 1. That the temporary triumph of a cause or a party is not a proof of its righteousness. The death and burial of Christ. 2. That we are not competent to judge the relation of the present events to the purpose and providence of the great God. (William Jones.) **Unto the rest beyond the river, Peace.**—*Peace beyond the river* :—I. THE ADVENT MESSAGE OF THE CHURCH TO SINNERS IS, "Beyond the river, Peace!" She tells of a promised land and arouses the slaves of sin. II. CHRIST IS COME AND WITH HIM PEACE, BUT WE MUST GO TO MEET HIM. III. THE ROAD THITHER IS HARD—we must cross the river of self-denial. A legend says that once a wanderer went to a city, and the first man he met said to him, "Of course you come to see our famous statue?" and each one he met in that town told him of the famous statue; and, moreover, each one prided himself in having something to do with it: this one to guard it; that one to keep it clean, and so forth. As the traveller stood before it he asked, "Who is this?" "Oh! we've forgotten his name," was the reply, "but that's no matter, it is a splendid statue, and the glory of our town." Sadly the wanderer turned away, and do you know, dear people, as he went out of the gate some little children cried, "Why, that is the man our famous statue was put up to!" Is it not still possible for men and women to be church-goers and church-workers, to be proud of their Church, and yet the Living Christ passes by unknown? (*The Literary Churchman.*)

CHAPTER V.

Vers. 1, 2. **Then the prophets, Haggai.**—*The great work resumed* :—The best commentary on these verses is the first chapter of Haggai. I. THE INCITERS TO THE WORK. 1. Want of interest in the work is implied. 2. Obligation to perform the work is implied. 3. Exhortations to resume the work were given. II. THE

LEADERS IN THE WORK. "Then rose up Zerubbabel," &c. 1. They resumed the work readily. 2. They led the work appropriately. "Those that are in places of dignity and power, ought with their dignity to put honour upon and with their power to put life into every good work." 3. They led work influentially. The example of those who occupy high stations is—(1) Most conspicuous. (2) Most attractive. III. THE HELPERS IN THE WORK. "The prophets." They assisted by their—1. Exhortations to vigorous prosecution of the work. 2. Assurances of the presence of God with them. 3. Promises of future blessings from God to them. IV. THE GREAT FIRST CAUSE OF THE WORK. "The Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel," &c. "All holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works do proceed" from Him. "I will build My Church," said our Lord to Peter. All the inspiration, wisdom, &c., of the under-builders come from him. Learn—1. The insidious nature of worldliness. 2. The value of faithful ministers. 3. The solemn obligation of men in eminent stations. (*William Jones.*) *Hebrew prophets in unfavourable times*:—The Hebrew prophets came when the circumstances of society were least favourable. Like painters arising to adorn a dingy city, like poets singing of summer in the winter of discontent, like flowers in the wilderness, like wells in the desert, they brought life and strength and gladness to the helpless and despondent, because they came from God. The literary form of their work reflected the civilisation of their day, but there was on it a light that never shone on sea or shore, and this they knew to be the light of God. We never find a true religious revival springing from the spirit of the age. Such a revival always begins in one or two choice souls—in a Moses, a Samuel, a John the Baptist, a St. Bernard, a Jonathan-Edwards, a Wesley, a Newman. (*W. F. Adeney, M.A.*)

Vers. 3-5. At the same time came to them Tatnai.—*The great work investigated and continued*:—THE SACRED WORK INVESTIGATED BY THE SECULAR AUTHORITIES. 1. The nature of the investigation. 2. The spirit of the investigation. The eye of the world is upon the work of the Church to-day. Let the members see to it that it shall be apparent to all unprejudiced persons that their work tends to promote truth and righteousness, purity and peace, piety and patriotism. II. THE SACRED WORK CARRIED ON THROUGH THE DIVINE BLESSING. "But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews," &c. This suggests—1. The Divine interest in the work. 2. The Divine oversight of the work. 3. The Divine inspiration of the workers. 4. The Divine protection of the workers. (*William Jones.*)

Vers. 6-17. The copy of the letter that Tatnai.—*The letter of the king concerning the work*:—This letter has three chief divisions. I. THE INQUISITION OF THE PERSIAN AUTHORITIES. II. THE REPLY OF THE JEWISH LEADERS. It presents the following aspects of the work. That it was—1. Not a mere human enterprise, but a Divine commission. 2. Not an innovation, but a restoration. 3. Not in a spirit of presumption and pride, but of obedience and humility. 4. Not in opposition to, but in conformity with, royal authority. 5. Not political, but religious in its character. III. THE APPEAL OF THE PERSIAN AUTHORITIES TO THE KING. Conclusion: Two things we may well admire and imitate. 1. The fairness of the Persian officials. 2. The faithfulness of the Jewish leaders. (*Ibid.*) We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth.—*The supremacy of God*:—Consider: I. THE UNIVERSAL SUPREMACY OF GOD. 1. Its ground. (1) The perfections of His being. (2) All things were created by Him. (3) All things are sustained by Him. (4) The benefits He bestows upon us and especially our redemption by Christ. 2. Its extent. (1) Throughout heaven. (2) Throughout earth. (3) Throughout hell (2 Pet. ii. 4). II. THE GREAT OBLIGATION OF MEN. To obey Him. Our obedience should be—1. Complete. 2. Perpetual. 3. Hearty. 4. Joyous. III. THE EXALTED PRIVILEGE OF MEN. When the service of God is rightly estimated, it is regarded as a glory and rejoiced in as a privilege. (*Ibid.*) But after that our fathers had provoked the God of heaven.—*Arguments against sinning*:—In this verse we have three weighty reasons against abstaining from sin. I. IT PROVOKES GOD. This will be more impressively realised if we reflect that He is a being of—1. Infinite purity. 2. Infinite patience. II. IT DEPRIVES THE SINNER OF HIS PROTECTION. III. IT STRIPS THE SINNER OF POWER TO BATTLE WITH HIS FOES. Guilt robs a man of courage. The consciousness of right action in a righteous cause is the mightiest inspiration in conflict and the surest defence in peril. (*Ibid.*)

CHAPTER VI.

VERS. 1-5. And search was made in the house of the rolls.—*The search for the decree of Cyrus*.—Learn—1. Honest and thorough investigation promotes the interests of religion and of the Church of God. 2. The advantage of written history. 3. How great should be our gratitude for the sacred writings. (*William Jones*.) “*The house of books*”:—One of Mr. Layard's most valuable discoveries was that of a set of chambers in a palace at Koyunjik, the whole of the floor of which was covered more than a foot deep with terra-cotta tablets inscribed with public records. A similar collection has been recently found in the neighbourhood of Babylon. In some such record-house the search for the edict of Cyrus was made. (*W. F. Adeney, M.A.*) **A record thus written.**—*Record of the year*:—The record here referred to was of what had been done for the house and service of God. It was a religious record such as I propose we should now read of the past year. Records are made of changes of what is altering from day to day in that great empire of change of which we are all subjects. This law of change is often spoken of as a melancholy law. It is better to regard it as the decree of growth and progress. It is the ordinance of escape from old limitations, and the impulse of rising to new stages of life to gain fresh energy of thought and will. A state of sameness or immobility would be in truth a wretched doom. The record of any year is not a record of sadness or decay alone, even as respects this world, but very much of delight and advancement. **I. THE FIRST CHAPTER IS THAT OF NEW BEING, BIRTH AND GROWTH.** Many houses have been made the scenes of holy gladness by the gifts of God's creative and inspiring power. What trust so great as that of a living spirit, with its own individual nature and with capacities for a peculiar development of intellectual and moral strength? With what reverent, trembling sense of responsibility it should be received! What office so high in rank, so great in opportunity, so large in patronage or susceptible of good, with such hope and fear wrapped up in it, as the parental office? What expanding of outward nature or unfolding of earthly ambition is really so grand and affecting as that of an undying soul? No changes of material growth, of splendid seasons and solemn spectacles can equal this. It makes the purest inspiration of love, it turns self-sacrifice into a pleasure; it plies the inventive faculties with all knowledge and wisdom to provide for the beloved object; it draws the mind into long foresight of its benefit and improvement; and by the force of mingling filial and parental communications exalts the soul to a perception of the relation of all to Him who is the common Father. Life's record, then, is not all of gloomy change and irreparable privation, but of strength enhancing, existence renovating, and of new possession. **II. BUT I MUST TURN THIS ILLUMINATED LEAF OF THE RECORD TO A PAGE VEILED IN SHADES.** It is the record of sickness and decline. And what shall we say of this change? We cannot make our record all pleasant and cheerful if we would. The skeleton that the Egyptians carried to their banquets will intrude upon every feast of our earthly joy and fling its ghastly shadow both across the avenues of our immediate thought and along the vistas of our farthest recollection. But although sickness comes with very sharp instrumentalities, yet she comes with a bright retinue. Patience, resignation, spiritual thoughts of God and of futurity come with her. As the most blazing effulgence of heaven sleeps within the black cloud, so in the lowering darkness and eclipse of bodily suffering often lies the very brilliance of a spiritual and Divine glory. **III. WE NOW TURN THE LAST LEAF OF OUR RECORD.** It ends, like all earthly records, with death. God by His Son Jesus Christ lifts up the burden of sadness that settles down on a record like this. Being dead in the body, our departed friends yet speak for truth and goodness more loudly and more persuasively than when their words fell on our outward hearing. They have gone that they might awaken our virtue, and that they might chill and discourage our worldly lusts. Like the stars, though with a warmer attraction, they lift and beckon us up. The light burns on, the fountain flows, the music sounds for us. Neither is this final change and record in the providence of God a ground for lamentation. It is rather a declaration of our native dignity as His children. It is the announcement of our glorious destiny. It is a summons to us to gird up our loins, trim our lamps, watch and be ready. (*C. A. Bartol.*)

Ver. 4. And let the expenses be given out of the king's house.—*A believer's expenses*:—I. WHAT ARE OUR EXPENSES? The expenses referred to in the text are

those connected with the return of the Jews to their own land, the rebuilding of the temple and its continual sacrifices. 1. Our release from the thralldom of sin involved enormous expenditure (1 Pet. i. 18, 19). 2. The important steps of public profession of faith in Christ, and of union with His Church, need peculiar supplies of grace. 3. There is much new material to be built up in our habits and life. 4. Our bodies being temples of the Holy Ghost, every physical power and every mental faculty should be "a vessel unto honour, sanctified and meet for the Master's use." 5. Our hearts are altars whereon should be offered the sacrifices of worship and praise. II. WHERE SHALL WE FIND MEANS TO MEET THESE EXPENSES? 1. The Word of God's truth. 2. The throne of His grace. 3. The fellowship of His people. 4. The dispensation of His providence. 5. The opposition of His foes. The Persian monarch was naturally Israel's enemy, yet God arranges that he shall pay Israel's expenses. Even the lions we may meet shall supply sweet honey for our nourishment and refreshment. 6. The work of Christ (Phil. iv. 19). III. HOW SHALL WE ACT IN THE PRESENCE OF SUCH ABUNDANCE? 1. We need not be afraid of exhausting Heaven's treasures. 2. We dare not be slow in availing ourselves of these supplies. 3. We cannot help wondering at the goodness of the King. 4. We will not forget to express our gratitude to the King. 5. We must not be so selfish as to hide these glad tidings. (*R. S. Latimer.*)

Vers. 8-11. **Moreover I make a decree what ye shall do to the elders of these Jews.**—*The Scriptural warrant for an established Church*:—Look at this history, and consider candidly the great principles involved in these facts. Consider—I. WHO THESE MEN WERE WHO ISSUED THESE DECREES CONCERNING THE BUILDING, AND CONCERNING THE SUPPLIES OF THE HOUSE OF GOD AT JERUSALEM. They were Gentile kings. II. WHAT IT WAS THAT THESE KINGS ORDERED. They ordered—1. The building of the house, and that the expenses incurred thereby should be taken from the king's treasury. 2. The supply of the house, with every item of all the details necessary for carrying out the worship of God—rams, and lambs, and bullocks, and wheat, and wine, and oil, and salt, according to the appointment of the priests. 3. They assigned certain reasons why this should be done. (1) That sacrifices of sweet savour might be offered to the God of Heaven. (2) That prayer might be made for the life of the king and his sons. (3) That wrath might not come upon the king's realm, implying that, if they did not do this, the realm incurred the wrath of God. 4. They insisted upon all this by imposing a heavy penalty upon any recusant subject. The penalty in the decree of Darius was death; the penalty in the decree of Artaxerxes was varying, according to the discretion of the executive magistracy, "whether unto death, or to banishment, or to confiscation of goods, or to imprisonment"; but in each case, there was a penalty for non-payment. III. THE PARTIES ADDRESSED IN THE DECREE, AND INCLUDED AMONGST THE CONTRIBUTORS. These were not the people only who approved of, and could enjoy the worship of the house, but they included also the adversaries, who did not approve of—who could not enjoy—and who would not join in the worship of the house; yet, although they did not approve, although they would not join in the worship of that house, they were compelled by the king's decree to contribute to the expense of building, and to the continued supply of the materials of that worship. And remember all this was done by those kings, according to the commandment and in harmony with the revealed will of the Lord God of Israel. (*H. M'Neile, M.A.*)

Vers. 9, 10. **That they may offer sacrifices of sweet savours unto the God of heaven.**—*Sacrifice as a rule of supplication unto God*:—I have made choice of this passage to show that sacrifice was a rite of supplication to God, wherein the supplicant came not with his naked prayer, but presented something unto God whereby to find favour in His sight. The thing presented was a federal gift, consisting of meat and drink, in the tender whereof as a sinner he recognised himself to be his God's vassal and servant, so by acceptance of the same he was reconciled and restored to His covenant by the atonement and forgiveness of his sins. For as according to the custom of mankind, to receive meat and drink from the hand of another was a sign of amity and friendship, much more to make another partaker of his table, as the sinner was here of God's, by eating of His oblation: hence those who came to make supplication of the Divine Majesty whom they had offended were wont by this rite to make way for their suit by removing the obstacle of His offence. 1. It is often said of Abraham and Isaac that where they pitched their tents they also built an altar, and "there called upon the name of the Lord"; but an altar is a place for

sacrifice; therefore sacrifice must be a rite whereby they called upon the name of God. 2. The same appears by the speech of Saul (1 Sam. xiii. 12), which shows that to offer a burnt-offering was to make supplication (1 Sam. vii. 8, 9). 3. This is further proved by Psa. cxvi. 13: "I will take the cup of salvation" (or drink offering) "and call upon the name of the Lord." 4. The same is implied in Micah vi. 6 and also in Prov. xv. 1, where sacrifice and prayer are taken the one for the other. 5. The like may be inferred out of Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple and the Lord's answer thereto. In the prayer no mention is made of sacrifice to be there offered, but only that God would be pleased to hear the prayers that should be made in that place or towards it. Nevertheless, when God appeared to Solomon in the night, He said unto him, "I have heard thy prayer, and have chosen this place to Myself for a house of sacrifice" (2 Chron. vii. 12). From what has been said we can understand in what sense the ancient Church called the Eucharist a sacrifice, and how harmless that notion was, viz., they took this sacrament to have been ordained by Christ to succeed the bloody sacrifices of the law, and to be a means of supplication and address to God, in the New Testament as they were in the Old, by representing the body and blood of Christ unto His Father, according to His appointment. (*J. Mede, B.D.*)

Vers. 14-22. **And they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai.**—*The true pulpit the best promoter of honest industry:*—It—I. QUICKENS THE POWER OF THOUGHT. He quickens public thought most who presents the most startling subjects with the highest enthusiasm. The true pulpit does this. The subjects it presents are the most vital to man's interests, the most stimulating to his inquiry. They involve the sublimest facts of nature and the grandest truths of inspiration, the highest interests of man now and for ever. Hence there is no power equal to the power of the true pulpit to break the monotony of mind and set the wheels of intellect agoing. This being so, the attendant on a true ministry will be—1. The more qualified to form a good plan of action. 2. The more practical sagacity he will have to adapt means to ends. 3. The more solicitous he will be to execute his plan. II. SUPPLIES THE TIMID WITH MOTIVE FOR ACTION. The man who has been made thoughtful by the power of the pulpit is made to feel that the more successful he is in his business—1. The more useful he is as a citizen. 2. The more useful as a religionist. (*Homilist.*) *Prophets and builders:*—The prophet and the builder must always go hand in hand. It is noticeable that the builder seldom or never goes first, but invariably succeeds the intelligent and ardent speaker. This is only another way of saying that thought precedes action. When men think deeply they are preparing the way for laying massive foundations by persons who could not themselves have entered into such intellectual strife. The one must not despise the other. Haggai built nothing, nor did Zechariah probably lay stone upon stone; on the other hand, Zerubbabel may not have been a man of active thought, and Jeshua may not have been gifted with eloquence; but they all worked together—the first man, seeing the truth of God and feeling the burden of the zeal of heaven, excited the sentiment of the two, that they might proceed to give practical and visible effect to the noble prophecies dictated by the Spirit. It is in vain for hearers to complain of preachers when they themselves are not prepared to carry out the word of the Lord. (*J. Parker, D.D.*) *God requires men to work:*—God puts the oak in the forest, and the pine on its sand and rock, and says to men, "There are your houses, go hew, saw, frame, build, make." God builds the trees; men must build the house. God supplies the timber; men must construct the ship. God buries the iron in the heart of the earth; men must dig it, and smelt it, and fashion it. Clay and rock are given us, not brick and square stones. What is useful for the body, and, still more, what is useful for the mind, is to be had only by exertion—exertion that will work men more than iron is wrought, and will shape men more than timber is shaped. Again, in the spiritual world God requires men to work. He gives them certain things, and then says, "Go, work." He requires them to work in building up His spiritual temple as much as He required the Jews, in days of old, to work in building up His earthly temple. *The building of God's temple:*—Men are like workmen set each by the architect upon some single bit of carving. One has given him to fashion a fragment where incompleteness breaks a promise of beauty. Another has set him only level lines and surfaces of blank monotony. To one it falls to carve a head without a body; to another, a lovely face; to many, patterns seemingly of little grace or meaning. But the task of each demands long labour and utmost care. At last the various blocks are put together,

and, lo! there rises a glorious cathedral, filling eye and heart with its majesty and loveliness, destined to draw to it and shelter within itself one generation after another of devout worshippers. So, the temple of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, is building through the ages. Whoever, in high place or in low, is living the life of fidelity and love, is carving a stone for the fabric. (*George S. Merriam.*) *The erection of churches:*—There is no book that throws more light upon the obligation of building temples for God, and the spirit that should ever inspire it, than that of Ezra. I. IN BUILDING A CHRISTIAN TEMPLE WE EXPRESS OUR FELT CONNECTION WITH THE SPIRITUAL WORLD. All building may be regarded as the expression of some sentiment, instinct, or wish of human nature. Markets, senate-houses, theatres, hotels, have all risen as the effects, embodiments, and realisations of some principle in our common nature. But these are all for our material wants and interests. In building a house for God we declare that we have other relations than those that connect us with this material system, other wants than those of the body, other interests than the secular and the physical. We thus attest our connection with the spiritual universe, our relation to eternity, our moral obligation to the Infinite, our desire for communion with God. II. IN BUILDING A CHRISTIAN TEMPLE WE EXPRESS THE IDEA THAT WE REQUIRE SPECIAL MANIFESTATIONS OF GOD. In the temple of nature God is portrayed in every object and proclaimed in every sound. But we feel that some other manifestation is required. In nature we can only see Him as the Almighty Creator and Absolute Sovereign; we want Him to appear in another relationship, one more suited to our fallen condition; we want Him to appear to us a redeeming God—one mighty to save. Had we not sinned we should need no such manifestations of God as we seek in the erection of temples. The temple of nature would suffice. There is no temple in heaven; God is seen in all, loved in all, worshipped in all. III. IN BUILDING A CHRISTIAN TEMPLE WE ATTEST OUR FAITH IN THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST. 1. As a revelation from God intended and adapted to meet the condition of sinners. 2. As necessary to all men, through all times. We feel that while coming generations may not require our systems of philosophy, our ecclesiastical polities, our schemes of government, our codes of laws, they will require the gospel; and hence we rear a temple for its proclamation. IV. IN BUILDING A CHRISTIAN TEMPLE WE EXPRESS OUR PHILANTHROPY. We are not building merely for ourselves, but for others; not even for our contemporaries, but for posterity. A Christian temple true to its mission is the greatest blessing to society. There the most soul-elevating ideas are proclaimed. Of all ideas to which men are subject none are so important as the religious. Other ideas will arouse certain faculties—some the intellect, some the imagination, some the emotions—but this the entire man. Other ideas act upon human nature as the rays of winter upon the soil; under its influence only a few germs will be evolved and a few plants will grow; but this, like the glowing beams of the vernal sun, will penetrate the deepest depths with its quickening energy, cause every seed-bud to burst into life and expand into fruitfulness. The mystic rod of Moses was not so mighty as the instrument the religious teacher wields. He lives nearest the heart of the world; he is up at the head springs, out of which proceed the issues of life. True religious ideas wherever proclaimed are the chief blessings of the world. In Christian temples such ideas are brought to bear with all their force upon the human mind; by them men are made to feel their obligations to be truthful, virtuous, benevolent, and Godlike; evil is subdued, hearts are changed, and souls are saved by these ideas. Christian temples are to society what tides are to the ocean, what the winds are to the atmosphere; they stir the mass and keep it pure. V. IN BUILDING A CHRISTIAN TEMPLE WE EXPRESS THE IDEA THAT PUBLIC WORSHIP IS TO BE PERPETUATED BY HUMAN INSTRUMENTALITY. We have reason to thank God that He has left such work as the building of temples to us. Had the necessities of life sprung from the earth, so as to require no labour, the physical energies of man would never have been developed. Had knowledge come into our mind without the exercise of our faculties, we should never have known anything of intellectual force. In like manner, had everything in religion been done for us, so that no demand would have been made upon our benevolent sympathies, we should have been beings of morbid religious sentiment, and without any force or greatness of character. (*Homilist.*) *The second temple:*—From this subject we learn—1. That man in this world needs a sanctuary, in which he may call on the name of the Lord his God. We are closely bound to the material globe, and the holiest affections. The most spiritual exercises naturally cling round some sacred spot where we have been accustomed to meet with God and with His people. Speaking

of an old village church, Washington Irving says, "For my part, there are feelings that visit me in a country church, amid the beautiful serenity of nature, which I experience nowhere else; and, if not a more religious, I think I am a better man on Sunday than on any other day of the seven." This principle lies deep in human nature. Among the most sacred memories of life are the childhood recollections which carry us back to the old familiar church, which then seemed so grand and impressive, where with father and mother we reverently worshipped God. 2. We learn that toil and sacrifice enter into the building of these sanctuaries. God does not ask for that which costs us nothing. Sacrifice may not be needed by Him, but it is necessary for us, and without it human nature cannot attain its highest and best. 3. We learn not to neglect the sanctuary. (*E. B. Mason.*)

Kept the dedication of this house of God with joy.—*Dedicating the temple:*—I. THE BUILDING OF GOD'S HOUSE WAS CARRIED ON IN FACE OF OBSTACLES. Every important work has its hindrances. No great results have been achieved without meeting obstacles. But men have always been found qualified for the hard tasks. A clear brain, boundless energy, and unflinching will are hidden away in the right man, ready to be revealed at the right time. The tremendous barriers that stand before the waiting and needed reform chill the courage of the many, while they also arouse the energy and provoke the will of the true leader. Haggai had counted the cost, and knew exactly what he had to contend against. There was the cry of procrastination. "The time is not come—the time that the Lord's house should be built." "The time is not ripe" is a phrase that might often be interpreted to mean, "the people are not ready." When any reform is pressing, you hear a clamour for delay. There are some who take counsel of their fears rather than of their faith. When Lincoln read his Proclamation of Emancipation to Seward, the Secretary of State counselled delay, until at last the President took the matter into his own hands and sent the message of liberty ringing through the land. Haggai understood the reason for delay, the people were filled with self-love and desire for display. II. THE BUILDING OF THE TEMPLE HAD A MORAL AND SPIRITUAL INFLUENCE ON THE PEOPLE. At the dedication they offered a sin offering of "twelve he goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel." When once the temple was furnished, and the people saw all the appointments complete and an altar standing before them and in use, their sense of sin was aroused. The first sacrifice on that new altar was for their sins. With their new house they began a new life. The house of God in a community stands for a spiritual idea. The school-house and college stand for the intellectual needs of man. The moral and spiritual side finds its exponent in the church. These silent memorials of God's grace compel us for a moment to think of duty and the hereafter, and they are suggestive of the rest that "remaineth." A reverential soul can worship God anywhere, but a house dedicated to Him is an aid to such worship. While there we are released for the time from the distracting sights and sounds of outside life, and under the singing of hymns and the uplifting influence of prayer the mind becomes calmed for the consideration of truth. III. THE HOUSE OF GOD IS THE HOME OF JOY. The Oriental expressed his feelings in most demonstrative ways. He shouted, clapped his hands, and danced when happy, and these extravagances were carried into his religious worship. Worship with the Jew was a natural channel for the display of feeling, while the Occidental suppresses his emotion in worship. We need more naturalness in the house of God. We come before God to express ourselves, not to suppress ourselves. The very truth proclaimed in God's house is fitted to produce the liveliest emotions. Mankind ought to be induced to come to the house of God because of the abundance of peace to be found there. The view of God should be the one fitted to draw all hearts to Him. A young man, homeless and lonely, wandered through the streets of one of our cities. He could get no work, and had had no food for some time. Despair had seized his soul, and in that frame of mind he entered a church and dropped into a back seat. The sermon was being delivered, and it presented such a view of God and emphasised certain elements of truth that it deepened his despair, and he rushed from the church and threw himself into the river. This ought not to have been. There are stern truths in the gospel, yet to give them undue prominence, and make them overshadow the obvious intent of the gospel is to deprive it of its essential quality of hopefulness. The house of God stands for the best and brightest and cheeriest in human life. (*Monday Club Sermons.*) *Dedicating the temple:*—We are here advised as to the accessories by which the builders of the temple were enabled to succeed. I. GOD WAS WITH THEM. All along He had been predisposed in their behalf. We also are exhorted to work out

our own salvation because it is God that worketh in us both to will and to do. II. GOD WAS PLEASED TO COMMUNICATE WITH THEM THROUGH HIS ORDAINED SERVANTS. Haggai was an old man whose strength lay largely in admonition. Zechariah was younger, more inclined to the dreaming of hopeful dreams and the seeing of bright visions. III. THEY WERE ENCOURAGED BY THE FAVOURABLE ATTITUDE OF TEMPORAL PRINCES. The dedication took place in the month Adar, "the month of splendour," so called because of the brightness of its suns and the beauty of its flowers. 1. A hundred bullocks, two hundred rams, and four hundred lambs were offered in sacrifice; "and for a sin offering, twelve he goats for all Israel." There is something pathetic in the mention of these he goats. Ten of the twelve tribes, having cut themselves loose from their brethren, had little or no part in the building of this temple, but they were remembered, and a place in the sin offering was sacredly reserved for them. It was as when mothers set vacant chairs for their absent, wayward sons on thanksgiving day. Whatever might happen, the religious unity of Israel must be preserved. In like manner the Church of Christ, however parted asunder by the controversies of the past, should be at one in the work of the kingdom and in the rejoicings of the triumph of Christ. 2. At this dedication the ancient order of service was restored. The assignments of the priests and Levites date back to the time of Moses (Num. iii. 6-10). It does not follow that because a custom is old it is obsolete. Prayer is as old as human want, like the air we breathe, and time can make no improvement upon it. It should be observed that the Feast of Passover was among the venerable customs which were revived at this dedication. It was a foreshadowing of the atonement of Christ, without which all other pomp and circumstance of service are a dumb show. (D. J. Burrell, D.D.)

*The joy of dedicating a house for the Lord:—*I. WE OBSERVE IN GENERAL THAT THE JOY WITH WHICH THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL, &c., KEPT THE DEDICATION OF THE HOUSE OF GOD AROSE—1. Because of the consideration of its being now completely finished. 2. Of their regarding it as a token of God for good, a demonstration at once of His faithfulness and favour towards them and of the delightful prospect which it held out to them of their enjoying with comfort and with advantage the public ordinances of religion. II. BUT MORE PARTICULARLY THIS JOY AROSE—1. From the consideration of their having been honoured and enabled to build a house to the Lord their God. 2. From the consideration of its being a means of promoting the glory of God. 3. From its being a means of securing the observance and extending the benefits of religious ordinances to future and succeeding generations. (G. B. Brand.)

*The dedication of the second temple:—*I. THE OCCASION WAS ONE OF JOY. Hebrew and Christian worship are joyful, because believers worship a revealed God of salvation. Heathen worship is a straining or groping of man after God (1 Kings xviii. 26-29). II. THE SERVICE WAS ONE FOR WHICH ALL WHO HAD TO TAKE PART IN IT HAD PREVIOUSLY PURIFIED THEMSELVES. III. THERE WERE BURNT OFFERINGS AS A TOKEN OF THE CONSECRATION OF THE PEOPLE HEART AND SOUL AFRESH TO GOD. IV. THERE WERE SIN OFFERINGS. In Divine worship there should always be a recognition of sin, and of Christ's having "put away sin" by the sacrifice of Himself. V. THERE WAS THE OBSERVANCE OF THE PASSOVER. They loved God because God loved them; this is the order now, and we cannot reverse it (1 John iv. 19). VI. THE FEAST OF UNLEAVENED BREAD WAS KEPT JOYFULLY FOR SEVEN DAYS. 1. In token of national unity and fellowship. 2. In token of their desire to cultivate purity. VII. The new national life thus inaugurated had far less of pomp and show about it than were seen in the days of Solomon. But there was more of spiritual power (Hag. ii. 9). (C. Clemance, D.D.)

The dedication of the temple was characterised by—I. RELIGIOUS REJOICING. The reasons for this were—1. Protracted labours brought to a close. 2. The honour offered to Jehovah their God. 3. The benefits which were likely to accrue to men through their sacred edifice and its worship. II. DEVOUT GRATITUDE. III. DEEP HUMILITY. IV. APPROPRIATE ARRANGEMENTS FOR ITS FUTURE USE. (William Jones.)

Ver. 21. To seek the Lord God of Israel.—*Seeking God:—*Birds are very fond of catching the last evening rays of a winter's sun, and are often to be found in the afternoon on banks facing the west, or swinging, if there is no wind, on the topmost branch of trees. On the mountains, too, all birds, as the sun gets low, take to the slopes to face the west, whilst in the morning they betake themselves to the eastern banks and slopes to meet his rays. Golden plovers, in the evenings, ascend from slope to slope, as each becomes shaded by the intervening heights, until they are all collected on the very last ridge which the sun shines upon. God's children

resemble birds in seeking light, only the light they seek is the light of goodness, and truth, and righteousness which comes from God. They seek the Source of Light, and turn away from the darkness. (*S. S. Chronicle.*)

Ver. 22. For the Lord had made them joyful.—God the joy-bringer:—I. GOD IS THE JOY-MAKER. 1. The object of much that God does is simply the blessedness of human hearts. The poorest creature that lives has a right to ask of God the satisfaction of its instincts, and every man has a claim on God to make him glad. God pays all cheques legitimately drawn on Him, and regards Himself as occupied in a manner entirely congruous with His magnificence and infinitude, when He stoops to put some kind of vibrating gladness into the wings of a gnat that dances for an hour in the sunshine, and into the heart of a man that lives his time for only a very little longer. 2. God's method of making us glad is by putting Himself into us. The secret of all true human well-being is close communion with God. 3. By His providences He gives the secondary and lower gifts which men according to their circumstances need. He gives whatever is contributory to any kind of gladness; and if we are wise we shall trace all to Him. Our common mercies are His love-tokens and they all come to us just as the gifts of parents to their children do, with this on the fly-leaf, "With a father's love." II. THE OBLIGATION AND WISDOM OF TAKING OUR GOD-GIVEN JOYS. 1. Be sure you take Him. When He is waiting to pour all His love into your heart, and all His sweetness into your spirit, to calm your anxieties, to deepen your blessedness; to strengthen everything that is good in you; to be to you a stay in the midst of crumbling prosperity and a light in the midst of the gathering darkness, be sure that you take the joy that waits your acceptance. 2. Recognise Him in all common mercies, because He is at the back of them all. Everything ought to be vocal to us of the loving-kindness of our Father in heaven. Link Him with everything that makes your heart glad. God does not desire to be put away high up on a pedestal above our lives, as if He regulated the great things and the trifles regulated themselves; but He seeks to come as air into the lungs, into every particle of the mass of life, and to fill it all with His purifying presence. 3. Recognise Him in common joys. 4. Be sure that you use the joys which He gives. There are two ways in which you can look at the world and at everything that befalls you. There is enough in everybody's life to make him sad if he selects these things to dwell upon. There is enough in everybody's life to make him continually glad if he wisely picks out these things to think about. It depends altogether on the angle at which you look at your life what you see about it. For instance, you know how children do when they get a bit of a willow wand into their possession. They cut off rings of bark and get the switch alternately white and black, white and black, and so on right to the tip. Whether will you look at the white rings or the black ones? They are both there, but if you rightly look at the black you will find out that there is white below it, and it only needs a very little stripping off of a film to make it into white too. No Christian man has a right to regard anything that God's providence brings to him as such unmingled evil that it ought to make him sad. We are bound to "rejoice in the Lord always." 5. Be sure that you limit your delights by God-made joys. There is nothing sadder than the joys that come into a life and do not come from God. Let us see to it that we do not fill our cisterns with poisonous sewage, when God is waiting to fill them with the pure river of the water of life. Does my joy help me to come near to God? Does it interfere with my communion with Him? Does it aid me in the consecration of myself? Does my conscience go with it when my conscience is most awake? The alternative presented to each of us is whether we will have surface joy and a centre of dark discontent, or surface sorrow and a centre of calm blessedness. The film of stagnant water on a pond of rottenness simulates the glories of the rainbow, in which pure sunshine falls upon the pure drops, but it is only painted corruption after all, and if a man put his lips to it, it will kill him. Such is the joy which is apart from God. (*A. Maclaren, D.D.*) *Cheerfulness:—*Cheerfulness is the root of constancy; for there is no more shifty and unreliable person than your curmudgeon, who is the slave of his own caprices; it is the best assurance of life, health, and wealth; it is the sign and evidence of a steady and energetic mind. It will make a fruitful youth, a happy manhood, and a serene old age. It is the "open sesame" to many secrets which the discontented and peevish strive hard to discover but always miss; it is the magic medium of friendship, if not even of love; where there may be lack of special tastes and sympathies, cheerfulness will do much to supply their place. As water to the

flower, so is cheerfulness to the mind. It keeps all green and sweet, and sends forth a gracious savour that is imperceptible, but wins all by its perfume. By cheerfulness a man's powers of work and production are doubled; he has, as it were, taken in a set of working partners most ready to aid him in every task and enterprise. Cheerfulness keeps all the faculties in good condition, so that they are ever ready to do their utmost without strain. (*Dr. Japp, in the "Argosy."*) *Joy favourable to religion: sing and rejoice*:—One bright summer's day we noticed a lark; at first we could not see it, but with the eye shaded by an uplifted hand it was soon detected. There it flew, a little speck, a dim spot in the Italian-blue sky, pouring down floods of music. On it went, higher and higher; as long as it sang and rejoiced, it arose. But when the song ceased its flight ceased too. Thus is it with our souls; they ascend Godwards while we sing and rejoice. "Rejoice in the Lord; for you it is safe"; take refuge in the citadel of heaven-sent bliss, and you are secure against many a Satanic attack. (*T. R. Stevenson.*)

CHAPTER VII.

VERS. 1-10. Ezra the son of Seraiah.—Ezra the distinguished:—Consider Ezra as—I. A man of distinguished ANCESTRY. II. A man of distinguished ATTAINMENTS. III. A man in the enjoyment of distinguished FAVOURS. IV. A man of distinguished INFLUENCE. V. A man of distinguished SUCCESS. VI. A man of distinguished AIM. He aimed at—1. The acquisition of the highest knowledge. 2. The practice of the highest knowledge. 3. The impartation of the highest knowledge. VII. A man of distinguished BLESSING. (*William Jones.*) **And he was a ready scribe in the law of Moses.—Scribism**:—Scribism was one of the remarkable features of the later days of Israel. Its existence in so much prominence showed that religion had passed into a new phase, that it had assumed a literary aspect. At first in their religious life the Jews did not give much heed to literary documents. Priestism was regulated by traditional usages rather than by written directions, and justice was administered under the kings according to custom, precedent, and equity. Quite apart from the discussion concerning the antiquity of the Pentateuch, it is certain that its precepts were neither used nor known in the time of Josiah, when the reading of the roll discovered in the temple was listened to with amazement. Still less did prophetism rely on literary resources. What need was there of a book when the Spirit of God was speaking through the audible voice of a living man? The function of the scribes was to collect the sayings and traditions of earlier ages, to arrange and edit the literary fragments of more original minds. Scribism rose when prophecy declined. It was a melancholy confession that the fountains of living water were drying up. It was like an aqueduct laboriously constructed in order to convey stored water to a thirsty people from distant reservoirs. Moreover, scribism degenerated into rabbinism, the scholasticism of the Jews. We may see its counterpart in the Catholic scholasticism which drew supplies from patristic tradition, and again in Protestant scholasticism—which comes nearer to the source of inspiration in the Bible, and yet which stiffened into a traditional interpretation of Scripture, confining its waters to iron pipes of orthodoxy. (*W. F. Adeney, M.A.*) **According to the hand of the Lord his God upon him.—God's helping hand**:—Ezra was wonderfully blessed in his desire and effort to restore Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. Seemingly, the power and the blessing which served Ezra so signally was all from "the king," but really it was all from Ezra's "God," whose will disposed the king's heart, whose providence guided every step, and whose power and Spirit gave efficiency and success to every plan and effort. And so it is in all human planning and effort. The success is just in the measure of "God's hand upon us." If we rise up to build, and do not first enlist His gracious approval, providential interposition, and Spirit's agency, our best efforts will miscarry or prove disastrous. If we plan a revival, and put in requisition the agencies, and will the conversion of sinners, we shall be sadly disappointed, if we do not first, by prayer and preparation, array God the Lord on our side, and get hold of His "outstretched arm of salvation." It is easy to work, and glorious are the results—all human agencies so readily fall into line and aid us—when the hand of the Lord our God is upon us. The application, the lesson, is therefore obvious—1. Prayer lies at the foundation

of all wise planning and all successful effort to advance Christ's kingdom in the world. 2. God's hand must be upon us—His providence must be enlisted in our behalf—there must be co-operation between the Divine and the human. 3. The secret of declension, of abounding evil, of the lack of converting power in the Church, of the dearth of revivals, is to be found in the fact that God's hand is not upon us, because of the lack of faith and prayer. (*J. M. Sherwood, D.D.*) **For upon the first day of the first month.**—*New Year's Day* (a talk with children):—The Bible attaches a great deal of importance to first things; the first-fruits of the earth were sacred, the first batch of bread was a consecrated batch, the first hour of the day, the first day of the week, the first week of the month, the first month of the year, the first year in seven years, and above all the first day of the first month, or in other words "New Year's Day," were considered specially important. It was on New Year's Day that the waters of the deluge finally dried up; it was on New Year's Day that the tabernacle was set up for the first time, that the temple was completely consecrated in the days of Hezekiah; and it was on New Year's Day that the captives in Babylon began their march out of captivity on their return to Canaan under Ezra. Now if you will just remember these four striking instances you will say that New Year's Day has a very important history. How monotonous life would be if there were not something new every day! Why you know that little baby boy at home wants a fresh toy every day. The old toys soon become uninteresting and he wants a new one constantly. Now you used to be the same when you were a very little boy, and you are not very different from that now. All through your little life you have been glad of any little change that gives a novelty and freshness to it. God thinks of all that, and therefore He gives you one thing at a time that will be likely to interest you; and when you have made use of that He gives you another and still another. He gives you life moment by moment, hour by hour, day by day. One day is in one sense very much like the other; and yet not two days are alike, especially when you think of the experiences of each day. Every day has something fresh in it; and God ordains all that in order to make you happy and to enable you to learn constantly, from some experience which each day teaches you, something you have not learnt before. This is specially true with regard to the first day of the New Year. You remember when at school you had a copy book given you. When you had it first of all it was a clean and charming copy book. When you began to write you took a great deal of trouble, especially with the first page. There was not a mistake or blot, or careless line on the whole page. The second page had just one little mistake. Then the third, perhaps, had a blot, and then you got rather careless, and hurried over some of the pages as you drew near the end of your copy book. Your teacher was probably vexed with you because you had not improved as you proceeded with it; then you felt ashamed of yourself, and said, "I wish I could begin again." The day at length came when you got a new copy book, and you were permitted to begin again. Now that is just as God deals with you. He gave you a fine copy book last year—it had 365 pages, and clean throughout; and you were expected to write your very best on those pages. I know some of you tried the first day or two, and now and then you tried again; but some of you got rather careless and restless as you advanced. Here and there you did that which was wrong, and that in each case left a blot behind. The Master took note of it, and there it is now in His presence. You cannot be very proud of your last year's history. Yet to-day the Lord says, "I know all about it; but I will give you a new copy book; and will put that old one aside and forget all about it. I will forgive you; but you must try to do better with this new copy book. Do your very best. If you cannot write as you would, ask Me to help you, and I will take your hand and guide it, and will help you to do what is right and well-pleasing in My sight." When I was a boy at school we used to have in our copy books what we called a script line on the top of the page. We used to copy that. Now the Saviour has put the script line over every day for us. It is His own writing, and we have to copy it. (*D. Davies.*) *New Year's Day*:—The name of Fernando de Magellan is not so well known as it should be. 'Tis over 350 years ago since he first discovered for us the Pacific Ocean, and to reach it he had to go through the Straits which have ever since borne his name—straits extending hundreds of miles, sometimes narrowing to the breadth of a broad river, and again expanding to the breadth of seas. What a day that was when, after long windings to and fro, his ships entered the waters of the Pacific! These were the first keels which ploughed it. His ships came back, but their brave commander never did; the silent sea which had beckoned him on lured him to his death. Is it much different with the

boom of the clock which tells us we have entered on the unknown stretch of a New Year? I think not; we are all voyaging, and no ship has gone in advance into the New Year. What lies ahead of us? No one knows, and no one needs to know. The important thing is, that with all our tacking to and fro we are seeking to drop our anchor at last in the good haven. If that is our aim, and we are prayerful and earnest about it, it matters little what the year has in store for us: all will prove well and rightly done in the end. Bend heart and head to this, and leave all else with God. (*J. Reid Howatt.*) **For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it.**—*Man's duty in relation to God's redemptive truth:*—The text indicates man's duty in relation to God's redemptive truth. The "law" here refers undoubtedly not to God's truth in general, but to that truth which He has condescended to reveal to man as a fallen being. In relation to this he has to do three things—I. HE HAS TO LEARN IT. "Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord." Two things are to be attended to in our endeavours to attain a knowledge of the truth which God has revealed to fallen man. 1. It must be sought for where it is to be found. Truth from God may be found written in the volume of nature, in the facts of human history, in the constitution of the human soul: but the truth from God which man wants as a sinner is to be found in the Bible. It must be sought for here; it is here under the cover of facts and histories, metaphors and poetries. 2. It must be sought for in the manner in which it is to be found. There is a right way of seeking as well as a wrong way. "Ezra had prepared his heart to seek" it. It must be sought—(1) With devout earnestness. It must be regarded as the supreme good. (2) With persevering diligence. It must be searched for as hidden treasures. II. HE HAS TO PRACTISE IT. Ezra had not only "prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord," but "to do it." The truth that God has revealed to sinners is not a subject for mere speculative thought or logical debate, it is a practical system. 1. The doing of it is essential to a thorough understanding of it. "He that doeth the will of God shall know of the doctrine." There are some things that a man may understand without practising. A man may understand architecture who has never built a house, agriculture who has never cultivated a farm, but no one can understand theology unless he has practised it. 2. The doing of it is necessary in order to be really benefited by it. Truth as ideas in the mind is only like floating clouds, rolling undischarged over the barren soil; but truth as deeds is like living streams so intersecting each other, and winding in every direction, as to touch the whole region into life, verdure, and beauty. III. HE HAS TO PREACH IT. "And to teach in Israel statutes and judgments." God's truth to sinners is to be taught by men. But none can teach it but those who have learnt it and practised: the right kind of preaching is life preaching. This life preaching is—1. The most intelligible. 2. The most incontrovertible. 3. The most constant. 4. The most Christlike. Conclusion: We must learn, practise, and preach the Bible. The last can only be done by those who have accomplished the first and second. (*Homilist.*) *Ezra the scribe:*—I. HIS PRIVATE CHARACTER. 1. I would call him a manly man. 'The most uncouth, ignorant country clodhopper may be drilled into being a common soldier, who may pass muster with his fellows in a review. But there are few men who can become great generals. Many are able and willing to follow a leader, but there are only too few who have the power to lead others. In the Church as well as in the State our great want is men, manly men. 2. He was a godly man. It is not always the case that great men are godly men also. Ezra prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord his God, and to do it; and that added to his greatness. 3. He was a man of discernment. For himself he found it was wisest and best to seek the law of the Lord and to do it. He saw also that it was righteousness for the nation as well as the individual. II. EZRA IN THE DISCHARGE OF HIS PUBLIC DUTIES. 1. As the leader of the returning exiles he was scrupulously honest. 2. He showed boundless trust in the protection of God. 3. As the ruler of the people in Jerusalem he identified himself with the people under him. (*James Menzies.*) *Ezra's exemplary conduct:*—Contemplate its chief features. I. THE ACQUISITION OF DIVINE TRUTH FOR HIMSELF. In aiming at this attainment he adopted—1. The right method. He sought for it. 2. The right manner. "He had prepared"—i.e., fixed or set—"his heart to seek the law of the Lord." 3. The right place. II. THE EMBODIMENT OF DIVINE TRUTH IN HIS LIFE. Knowledge misapplied is—1. Useless (*Matt. vii. 21-27; Jas. i. 25*). 2. An occasion of condemnation (*Luke xii. 47, 48*). III. THE COMMUNICATION OF DIVINE TRUTH TO OTHERS. He taught others both by his speech and by his action. Merely verbal teaching will not bear

comparison with that which is also of the character and conduct. The latter is—
 1. More intelligible. 2. More continuous. 3. More influential. (*William Jones.*)
The Christian ministry:—We have here pointed out some indispensable qualifications for an able minister of the New Testament. I. DEVOTEDNESS TO GOD'S WORD. II. PUBLIC INSTRUCTION. (*The Preacher's Portfolio.*) *Divine sequence in service*:—Everything in its due order is a universal law. This applies to Sabbath-school teaching. I. THERE MUST BE DILIGENT SEARCHING FOR THE LAW OF GOD. II. THERE MUST BE A HEARTY DOING OF THE DISCOVERED WILL. Alas! for him who seeks to teach others laws which he himself does not obey, and to enforce commands which he himself defies. III. THEN MAY WE TEACH THE LAW OF THE LORD. Let us give heed to this sequence. It is taught in many parts of Scripture; but let Ezra's embodiment of it make it plain. (*Sunday School Teacher.*) *A mind saturated with Scripture*:—The late Sydney Dobell, poet and philosopher, and devout Christian, has this remark: "The more exquisite your sense of beauty becomes, the dearer will the Holy Scripture become to you, the more natural and indispensable will the wisest and grandest of its sayings become to your heart and mind—as wings to the air, as feet to the ground, as light to the eyes; you will feel certain that the mind was created for the saying, and the saying for the mind. I learned at one period of my life the whole New Testament by rote, and I cannot unlearn the beauty of those sweet old Saxon phrases in which I thought so long. Full of 'the light that never was on sea or shore,' I feel, in using them, to mingle a new element with earthly speech and to relieve, in some sort, with their glory, the dreary lifelessness of words." *Testimonies to the Bible*:—"In this book," said Ewald to Dean Stanley, "is all the wisdom of the world." "That book," said Andrew Jackson, as he lay on his death-bed, "is the rock on which our republic rests." Said the great chemist Faraday, "Why will people go astray when they have this blessed book to guide them?" "If we be ignorant," say the translators of 1611, "the Scriptures will instruct us; if out of the way, they will bring us home; if out of order, they will reform us; if in heaviness, they will comfort us; if dull, quicken us; if cold, inflame us." Hooker said, "There is scarcely any part of knowledge worthy of the mind of man but from Scripture it may have some direction and light." Theodore Parker said, "The literature of Greece, which goes up like incense from that land of temples, has not half the influence of this book of a despised nation. The sun never sets upon its gleaming pages." Heine, the infidel, said, "What a book! Vast and wide as the world, rooted in the abysses of creation, and towering up behind the blue secrets of heaven. Sunrise and sunset, promise and fulfilment, birth and death, the whole drama of humanity, all in this book." (*Sunday School Times.*) *Study of the Scriptures*:—The Abbé Wincklemann, a classical writer on the fine arts, after descending with great zeal on the perfection of sculpture, as exhibited in the Apollo Belvedere, said to the students, "Now go and study it, and if you see no beauty in it, go again and again, go until you feel it, for be assured it is there." So we say to the Bible student, "Go and study the Scripture, and if at first you discover no beauty, go until you feel the power of its glorious truths, for be assured it is there." (*J. Bowden Allen.*) *The Scriptures a safeguard of a nation*:—If we wish to know what the Christian tradition has done for us, we must examine the moral standards of nations who have differed from us in not having it. For example, we must look at the Greeks of the fifth century before Christ, or the Romans at or after the period of the Advent. The Christian faith and the Holy Scriptures arm us with the means of neutralising and repelling the assaults of evil in and from ourselves. Mist may rest upon the surrounding landscape, but our own path is always visible. (*W. E. Gladstone.*) *The inestimable value of the Scriptures*:—Dr. Smith, of Edinburgh, preaching recently, said the Scriptures were an unalienable treasure of the Church, and urged his hearers to make a more diligent use of them. He told of an Australian farmer, who for years tried vainly to make a competence out of his soil. He transferred it at a low price to a neighbour, who shortly discovered a priceless mine upon the property. "So," the preacher said, "we are apt to forget that underneath the newspapers and novels which cumber our tables, lies a small volume which is worth inestimably more than all of them." *The Scriptures a winding splendour*:—Passing from Bonn to Coblenz, on the Rhine, the scenery is comparatively tame. But from Coblenz to Mayence it is enchanting. You sit on deck, and feel as if this last flash of beauty must exhaust the scene; but in a moment there is a turn of the river, which covers up the former view with more luxuriant vineyards, and more

defiant castles, and bolder bluffs, vine-wreathed, and grapes so ripe that if the hills be touched they would bleed their rich life away into the bowels of Bingen and Hockheimer. Here and there there are streams of water melting into the river, like smaller joys swallowed in the bosom of a great gladness. And when night begins to throw its black mantle over the shoulder of the hills, and you are approaching disembarkation at Mayence, the lights along the shore fairly bewitch the scene with their beauty, giving one a thrill that he feels but once, yet that lasts him for ever. So this river of God's Word is not a straight stream, but a winding splendour—at every turn new wonders to attract, still riper vintage pressing to the brink, and crowded castles of strength—Stolzenfels and Johannisberger as nothing compared with the strong tower into which the righteous run and are saved—and our disembarkation at last, in the evening, amid the lights that gleam from the shore of heaven. The trouble is, that the vast majority of Bible voyagers stop at Coblenz, where the chief glories begin. (*Christian Age.*)

Vers. 11-27. **Now this is the copy of the letter that the king Artaxerxes—***The office and duty of the civil magistrate* :—It is the office of a Christian magistrate to encourage and protect good men in the exercise of religion, both by his own example and wholesome laws, and to promote true religion in his dominions. Thus far the good magistrates among Jews, heathens, and Christians have proceeded to their lasting honour and commendation; but those who acted on the contrary have been branded with infamy and contempt. Joshua, the Judges, David, Solomon and Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash, Hezekiah and others, destroyed idolatry, erected altars, ordered the courses of the priests, built and repaired the temple, collected and disposed of money for those charges, caused the Passover and other religious duties to be celebrated, and wrought a glorious reformation in true religion, when the priests and Levites were negligent in their office. Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, Darius, Artaxerxes, the King of Nineveh, Alexander the Great, and Seleucus, &c., made decrees through all their dominions to worship the true God; they set His people at liberty, ordered them to rebuild the temple to the Lord God of heaven, allowed timber, salt, and similar charges for the sacrifices out of their own treasury; they required the prayers of God's people for themselves, their families and dominions, they protected them from their adversaries and appointed solemn fasts, &c. Lycurgus, Numa, and Solon made laws concerning religion in Athens, Rome, and Sparta; Timoleon, Augustus, and others rebuilt and endowed all the temples that had fallen into decay in Crete and about Rome. Judas Maccabeus repaired the breaches, purchased holy vessels and instruments for the service of the temple, pulled down the idols, and cleansed the sanctuary from the profanation of Antiochus Epiphanes, chose priests of a blameless conversation, and appointed an anniversary festival in commemoration of the reparation of the temple which our Saviour honoured with His own presence (John x. 22). Constantine published several edicts in favour of Christian religion, granting to all professors the free exercise of it; he destroyed the idol temples, restored the former places of worship to them, and built several magnificent churches and gave great gifts to them; he also commanded fine copies of the Bible to be made. When the heresy of Arius infected the Church, he assembled the first General Council at Nice, consisting of 318 bishops from all quarters of the empire. He banished Arius and burnt his books, he settled the time for the keeping of Easter, and made many good laws for the discipline and government of the Church. Theodosius, Justinian, and others of his successors thought it their duty to enact good laws for the establishment of the true religion. The British, Saxon, and English princes have been as active therein as other Christian monarchs, for King Lucius sent a letter to Eleutherius, Bishop of Rome, desiring his directions to make him a Christian; he also turned some heathen temples into Christian churches and built and endowed others at his own charges. Ethelbert kindly received and maintained Augustine and his companions, Edward the Confessor built and granted great privileges to the Abbey of Westminster, and made many excellent laws for the benefit and protection of the Church, which were rather the laws of his predecessors than those of his own making. William the Conqueror at his coronation took an oath that he should defend the Church of Christ, and all our monarchs have done the like. By Act of Parliament the sovereign is declared to be supreme Head of the Church, and has the glory of being described as Defender of the Faith. (*Philoclesius.*) *The commission of Artaxerxes* :—It indicated a spirit of—I. GREAT REVERENCE FOR GOD. II. PROFOUND RESPECT FOR THE LAW OF

GOD. III. SINCERE REGARD FOR THE WORSHIP OF GOD. IV. HEARTY APPRECIATION OF THE CHARACTER OF A GOOD MAN. His liberal gifts may be exhibited as—1. A rebuke to the parsimony of many Christians. 2. An example to all Christians. (*William Jones.*)

Vers. 15. **The Lord God of Israel, whose habitation is in Jerusalem.**—*Jehovah's habitation*.—I. THIS HOLY ALLIANCE: "The God of Israel." We have here—1. A description of God and His Church. The "God of Israel" includes both. Israel His Church; and the God that claims it; a living God amidst a living people. 2. Infinitude associated with a royal seed. Israel signifies a prevailing prince before God. 3. A veritable portion on both sides. "The Lord's portion is His people"; "The Lord is my portion, saith my soul." 4. The living connection between God and His people constitutes the stronghold of faith. II. HIS HABITATION. He dwells—1. In "the Jerusalem which is above." 2. In the living Church of God which was typified by Jerusalem. 3. In the Jerusalem of every regenerated soul. (*J. Irons.*)

Ver. 23. **Whatsoever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be diligently done.**—*The decree of Artaxerxes*.—It is remarkable that some of the richest effusions of poetry in the whole Scriptures proceeded from heathen monarchs, e.g., Darius and Nebuchadnezzar. Consider these words—I. IN REFERENCE TO THE JEWISH CHURCH. 1. The state of the Jewish Church at this time is not unlike to that in which it was in the days of Ezra. It is impossible to behold them in their religious services, and not to see how thick a veil is yet upon their hearts. Nor do they manifest any respect for their own law in its sublimer precepts. Of real holiness of heart and life they are ignorant in the extreme. 2. But to us is given, no less than to Ezra, a command to advance their welfare. 3. In this work we should engage with all diligence (Rom. xi. 30, 31). II. IN REFERENCE TO THE CHURCH WHICH IS AMONGST US. 1. We need to have God's work advanced in our midst. 2. We ought to engage in this work with our whole hearts. Conclusion: We ought to obey this imperial mandate—1. In a way of personal reformation. 2. In a way of ministerial exertion. (*C. Simeon, M.A.*) *Christian missions*.—We may well sit at the feet of Artaxerxes and learn from heathen lips the extent of our duty and the nature of our obligations. We plead for missions. I. TO ASSIGN SOME REASONS FOR ACTIVE DEVOTEDNESS TO THE CAUSE OF GOD IN THE WORLD. 1. From the Divine authority by which it is enjoined. It "is commanded by the God of heaven." We love to see the estimate of Christian duties from the men of the world. They often take a just measure of our obligations. The law of love to the perishing heathen is clearly laid down. God makes man the medium of His blessings to man. The same God who bids us "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ" that we may be saved bids us "go into all the world," &c. We should like to see inscribed over all our missionary institutions the law, "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." 2. From the urgent necessity which exists for your exertions. 3. From the fearful consequences of the neglect of this duty. "For why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons?" 4. From the success which has attended the fulfilment of this duty. II. TO OFFER SOME SUGGESTIONS AS TO THE SPIRIT AND MODE IN WHICH THIS WORK SHOULD BE CARRIED ON. 1. Earnestly, without remissness. "Let it be diligently done." 2. Prayerfully. 3. Speedily. (*Samuel Thodey.*)

Vers. 27, 28. **Blessed be the Lord God of our fathers, which hath put such a thing as this in the king's heart.**—*Kings of Persia—nursing fathers of the Church*.—The book of Ezra contains an interesting record of the dealings of God in His providence towards His visible Church under the Persian Empire. That empire performed important services for the Church—a brief consideration of which as they are recorded in the first seven chapters of Ezra will exhibit wonderful instances of the watchful care of Providence for the Church, and open up the way for the following inferences: I. THE DECREE OF ARTAXERXES WAS RIGHT IN THE JUDGMENT OF GOD AS WELL AS IN THE JUDGMENT OF THE CHURCH. Ezra gives thanks to God for this decree and ascribes the procuring of it to the immediate hand of God. II. THAT IT IS OF GREAT IMPORTANCE TO OBTAIN THE COUNTENANCE AND AID OF THE CIVIL POWER IN FAVOUR OF THE VISIBLE CHURCH IN ALL AGES. It is true God can preserve and increase His Church without the aid and in spite of the opposition of kings and rulers. It multiplied amidst the exterminating persecution in Egypt;

and it was not lost during the seventy years' captivity in Babylon; and for three hundred years after Christ the Church was generally persecuted by the civil powers, and yet multiplied exceedingly. But still opposition by the civil powers, and much more persecution, is in itself an evil; and the nursing care of the kings of the earth is a great blessing to the Church. III. IF CIVIL AID AND COUNTENANCE BE SO IMPORTANT TO THE CHURCH, IT IS THE DUTY OF ALL WHO LOVE THE PROSPERITY OF JERUSALEM TO ENDEAVOUR TO OBTAIN IT. Ezra did so (ver. 6), "And the king granted him all his request according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him." IV. WE OUGHT NOT TO BE DISCOURAGED FROM SEEKING THE ADEQUATE SUPPORT OF THE STATE BY THE APPARENT IMPROBABILITY OF OBTAINING IT. "Who art thou, O great mountain?" said the prophet Zechariah, in reference to the usurping Persian king, stirred up by the enemies of the Church, "before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain" (Zech. iv. 6, 7). V. THE FRIENDS OF RELIGION AND THE CHURCH OUGHT NOT TO BE UNDULY CONCERNED WHICH PARTY IS UP OR WHICH IS DOWN. When the friends of the Church are uppermost, give thanks, like Ezra, to God, who putteth it into the heart of the king to beautify His house. When the enemies are uppermost, do as David did, when he encouraged himself in the Lord his God. VI. THE FRIENDS OF THE CHURCH OUGHT NOT TO BE MUCH MOVED EITHER BY THE FLATTERIES OR THE THREATS OF THE ENEMIES. VII. THE CHURCH NEEDS, AND IS ENTITLED TO, THE PRIVATE LIBERALITY OF INDIVIDUALS AS WELL AS THE PUBLIC SUPPORT OF THE NATION. Large and liberal as were the government grants by Darius, Cyrus, and Artaxerxes, yet the voluntary liberality of the private Jews was called into exercise. So it was in the time of Moses and the kings, and so it must be as it has been in the times of the gospel. VIII. THE CHURCH OF GOD OUGHT NOT TO BE TREATED EITHER BY INDIVIDUALS OR NATIONS IN A MEAN AND NIGGARDLY MANNER. Artaxerxes had not to build the temple—that was done already—but he beautified it; he laid out money on it, as some would say unnecessarily and extravagantly. But Ezra thanks God for putting such a thing as this into the king's heart, to beautify the house of God. IX. AS IT IS THE DUTY OF ALL TO SERVE AND GLORIFY GOD, SO NO ONE IS EXEMPTED FROM THE DUTY OF SUPPORTING HIS TRUE CHURCH. X. WE OUGHT NOT TO REFUSE TO ADD TO THE NUMBER OF MINISTERS AND BUILDINGS IN THE CHURCH UNTIL THE CHURCH IS PERFECTLY REFORMED. XI. THE AID OF GOVERNMENT TO THE EXTENSION OF THE CHURCH IS THE RICH GIVING TO THE POOR. XII. LET US NOT THINK THAT WE SHALL GROW POOR IF WE GIVE MUCH TO GOD. (*W. Mackenzie.*)

Exemplary praise:—I. THE TRUE OFFERERS OF PRAISE. Ezra exhibits in these verses—1. Unaffected humility. 2. Sincere piety. 3. Practical religiousness. II. THE GRAND OBJECT OF PRAISE. 1. The Supreme Being. 2. The Supreme Being in covenant relation with His worshippers. 3. The Supreme Being whom our fathers worshipped. III. GOOD REASONS FOR PRAISE. 1. God inspires the worthy purposes of men. 2. He beneficently influences the moral judgments of men. 3. He invigorates the heart and life of His servants. (*William Jones.*)

To beautify the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem.—*God's love of the beautiful*:—One of the desires common to humanity is the desire for what is beautiful. We need not go far for evidence of this universal feeling. It is seen declaring itself in the little flower that lends a nameless grace to the cottage window, in many a simple ornament and picture to be found in the homes of labour and in the preference given to some spot favoured with more than usual sweetness and charm. The desire for beauty and the expressions of it are the creation of the Divine inbreathing. To limit human conduct to what is strictly useful would impoverish existence and rob it of half its interest and grace. If utility were to be the sole standard of human action, the mother would be forbidden to kiss her child and the mourner to shed a tear at the graveside of a friend. According to this, to admire the glowing sunset or to lift our eyes in wonder to the star-spangled sky would be foolishness. The spires and monuments of our cities, the ornamental facings of our buildings, the taste and skill displayed in the laying out of our public parks and gardens, according to this system of appraisement, would be wasteful and worthless. Man desires beauty in the house of God because of its fittingness; we feel it to be in harmony with God's works above and around us to introduce something of the beautiful into the house of prayer and praise. The feeling of hostility in the presence of flagrant abuses of art is now passing away. There is no inevitable alliance between artistic arrangement and idolatrous practices—superstition need never be the offspring of the beautiful; and if good taste is desirable in the home, there is even stronger reason to give it fitting expression in the house of God. We are learners in the school of One who was greater than

the temple, One who was altogether lovely, whose loveliness was the loveliness of perfect deeds, and whose beauty was the beauty of holiness. With this beauty we must adorn life's daily temple, taking care that no image of falsehood, uncleanness, or dishonour mars its fairness and grieves the Holy Spirit that would dwell within. (*W. Proudfoot, M.A.*) *Beauty in God's house*:—So long as our streets are walled with barren brick, and our eyes rest continually, in our daily life, on objects utterly ugly, or of inconsistent and meaningless design, it may be a doubtful question whether the faculties of eye and mind which are capable of perceiving beauty, having been left without food during the whole of our active life, should suddenly be feasted upon entering a place of worship, and colour and music and sculpture should delight the senses and stir the curiosity of men unaccustomed to such appeal, at the moment when they are required to compose themselves for acts of devotion; but it cannot be a question at all, that if once familiarised with beautiful form and colour, we shall desire to see this also in the house of prayer; its absence will disturb instead of assisting devotion; and we shall feel it as vain to ask whether, with our own house full of goodly craftsmanship, we should worship God in a house destitute of it as to ask whether a pilgrim, whose day's journey has led him through fair woods and by sweet waters, must at evening turn aside into some barren place to pray. (*J. Ruskin.*)

CHAPTER VIII.

VERS. 1-20. And I gathered them together to the river that runneth to Ahava.
 —*The assembly at Ahava*:—I. THE LONG JOURNEY COMMENCED. II. AN IMPORTANT INSPECTION MADE. This halt illustrates—1. The need of seasons of rest. 2. The use of seasons of rest. III. A GRAVE DEFICIENCY DISCOVERED. Ministers of religion are sometimes slow in making personal sacrifices and rendering personal assistance even in a good enterprise. IV. THE SUPPLY OF THE DEFICIENCY SOUGHT. He sought them—1. By means of influential men. 2. By sending them to the right place. 3. By sending them to the right man. 4. By sending them with precise instructions. V. THE SUPPLY OF THE DEFICIENCY OBTAINED. 1. The supply was sufficient. 2. The supply was various. 3. The supply was remarkable for the presence of at least one man of distinguished ability. 4. The supply was obtained by the blessing of God. (*William Jones.*) **A man of understanding, of the sons of Mahli.**—*Men of understanding*—I. ARE THE GIFTS OF GOD. 1. They derive their abilities from Him. 2. They rightly develop their abilities by His blessing. 3. They attain their moral excellences by His blessing. II. ARE OF GREAT WORTH AMONGST MEN. 1. Understanding is essential to the beneficent employment of other gifts and powers. 2. The employment of understanding itself confers great benefits upon society. Conclusion: It behoves us—1. To praise God for men of understanding. 2. To prize such men. 3. To endeavour to become men of understanding. (*Ibid.*)

Ver. 21. Then I proclaimed a fast there.—*Prayer and fasting* (preached on the occasion of a public fast):—I. THAT THE BEST MEANS TO PROCURE SUCCESS UPON OUR COUNSELS AND ENDEAVOURS IS TO SEEK GOD FOR HIS BLESSING. 1. This results from the first principles on which all religion is built. (1) That there is a God of infinite power who governs the world and can dispose all things in it to such ends as are agreeable to His will. (2) That human policy and strength are of no moment when they come in opposition to His providence: "There is no wisdom, nor understanding, nor counsel against the Lord." (3) That He has a particular care of those who serve Him faithfully. 2. In giving His assistance God does not always act in so palpable a manner as that whereby we see second causes producing their effects. But that it is the most rational and most religious way to begin at Heaven in all His consultations and designs will appear by reflecting—(1) That it is impossible for a creature to be independent. (2) That God can no more cease to govern the world than He can cease to be God. (3) That He cannot govern His creatures if He does not influence them. (4) That those who depend upon their own policy and strength, without any regard to His will, affront His majesty, reject His government, and justly provoke Him to punish and disappoint them

(Prov. iii. 6, 7). II. THAT SOLEMN FASTING IS A PROPER METHOD TO BE USED IN SUCH ADDRESSES TO GOD. We have but two ways to express our thoughts and the inclinations of our minds, either by words or by such actions as naturally flow from them, and both of these are equally proper and therefore such as become our devotions. For God is the author of decency and order, and His service is then most decent and orderly when it is unaffected and agreeable to nature; and therefore such gestures or actions are proper in His worship which do naturally flow from or by custom are used to accompany such a disposition of mind as we ought to be in when we make our approaches to Him. Thus kneeling becomes us at our prayers, because it is the usual posture of supplicants; singing of hymns is decent in thanksgiving, because songs and music are fit attendants on praise and joy; and fasting is extremely proper for a solemn humiliation before God, for the begging pardon of our sins, and assistance in our difficulties, because it is a natural expression of sorrow, and is productive of humble thoughts in ourselves and devout ones towards God. And therefore we find that it has been the practice not only of the Churches of God, but even of the heathens themselves, to use solemn fasts upon extraordinary applications to Heaven, so that fasting is a part of worship prescribed by nature and by common sense of men. Public fasting should be attended with public demonstrations of seriousness, such as gravity in our discourse and behaviour, a ceasing from the business of our particular callings, abstaining from ornaments, recreations, and places of civil concourse, and spending the day in the public devotions of the Church and in the retirements of our closets. For though a private Christian may fast (as he may pray) without any of this pomp, and discharge the duty in his own breast, yet to make it public there is no other way but an outward solemnity; and a community cannot hold a fast but by such an appearance. In this the minds of men are more apt to be grave and serious when there is no appearance of jollity to divert them, they are drawn off from thoughts of worldly business and fixed on pious meditations, when they see their neighbours thronging to the temple, when there is no commerce in the shops nor hurry in the streets. Such a face of things shows that men are about the more serious business of another world. (*William Hayley, D.D.*)

Vers. 22, 23. For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers.—*Ezra's confidence in God*.—I. CONFIDENCE IN GOD AVOWED. 1. In His providence. 2. In His providence as efficiently promoting the interests of His people. 3. In His providence as opposed to those who forsake Him. II. CONFIDENCE IN GOD TESTED. 1. By their need of guidance. 2. By their need of protection. III. CONFIDENCE IN GOD MAINTAINED. 1. In not seeking guidance and defence from the king. 2. In seeking guidance and defence from God. IV. CONFIDENCE IN GOD VINDICATED. 1. In their inward assurance. 2. In the outward result. (*William Jones.*) *Ezra and his times*.—I. EZRA'S LANGUAGE WAS IN STRIKING CONTRAST WITH THE GENERAL STATE OF OPINION AROUND HIM. He knew he was right, and could afford to be singular. At particular crises of public opinion it devolves upon some men to go into the land of the enemy, that they may bring truth out of captivity. Such men have no ultimate fear for truth; they know its vitality. Such men never change sides. The world wonders at their eccentricity, and recommends them to beg or borrow a band of soldiers and horsemen to assist them in their progress; but they are ashamed to think of such a thing. If they could make truth successful to-morrow they must do it with truth's weapons and her weapons only; but they cannot advance the liberation of truth by any unworthy means, or by any unnatural alliance. II. EZRA'S SITUATION AFFORDED HIM AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ASSERTING THIS GREAT PRINCIPLE UNDER VERY TRYING CIRCUMSTANCES. Christ's whole life illustrates Ezra's principle of confidence in God under circumstances of great temptation. (*W. G. Barrett.*) *Ezra an example in business*.—I. His HUMILIATION. II. His FAITH. III. His PRAYER. IV. His HOLY JEALOUSY. V. His SUCCESS. (*R. Cecil.*) *Heroic faith*.—Our text gives us a glimpse of high-toned faith, and a noble strain of feeling. Ezra knew that he had but to ask and have an escort from the king that would ensure their safety till they saw Jerusalem. It took some strength of principle to abstain from asking what it would have been so natural to ask, so easy to get, so comfortable to have. The symbolic phrase "the hand of our God," as expressive of the Divine protection, occurs with remarkable frequency in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and though not peculiar to them, is yet strikingly characteristic of them. It has a certain beauty and force of its own. The hand is, of course, the seat of active

power. It is on or over a man like some great shield held aloft above him, below which there is safe hiding. So that great hand bends itself over us, and we are secure beneath its hollow. As a child sometimes carries a tender-winged butterfly in the globe of its two hands, that the bloom on its wings may not be ruffled by its fluttering, so He carries our feeble, enamoured souls enclosed in the covert of His almighty hand. As a father may lay his own large muscular hand on his child's tiny fingers to help him, or as "Elisha put his hands on the king's hands," that the contact might strengthen him to shoot the arrow of the Lord's deliverance, so the hand of our God is upon us to impart power as well as protection; and "our bow abides in strength" when "the arms of our hands are made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob." That was Ezra's faith, and that should be ours. Note Ezra's sensitive shrinking from anything like inconsistency between his creed and his practice, and we may well learn this lesson—to be true to our professed principles; to beware of making our religion a matter of words; to live, when the time for putting them into practice comes, by the maxims which we have been forward to proclaim when there was no risk of applying them; and to try sometimes to look at our lives with the eyes of people who do not share our faith, that we may bring our actions up to the mark of what they expect of us. Especially in regard to this matter of trust in an unseen hand, and reliance on visible helps, we all need to be very rigid in our self-inspection. Faith in the good hand of God upon us for good should often lead to the abandonment, and always to the subordination, of material aids. Each man must settle for himself when abandonment or subordination is his duty. We ought to work into our lives the principle that the absolute surrender and forsaking of external helps and goods is sometimes essential to the preservation and due expression of reliance on God. What shall we say of people who profess that God is their portion and are as eager in the scramble for money as anybody? What kind of commentary will sharp-sighted, sharp-tongued observers have a right to make on us, whose creed is so unlike theirs, while our lives are identical? Do you believe that "the hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him"? Then do you not think that racing after the prizes of this world, with flushed cheek and labouring breath, or longing, with a gnawing hunger of heart, for any earthly good, or lamenting over the removal of creaturely defences and joys, as if heaven were empty because some one's place here is, or as if God were dead because dear ones die, may well be a shame to us, and a taunt on the lips of our enemies? Note further that his faith not only impels him to the renunciation of the Babylonian guard, but to earnest supplication for the defence in which he is so confident. So for us the condition and preparation on and by which we are sheltered by that great hand is the faith that asks and the asking of faith. We make God responsible for our safety when we abandon other defence and commit ourselves to Him. He will accept the trust and set His guards about us. So our story ends with the triumphant vindication of this Quixotic faith: "The hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way; and we came to Jerusalem." The ventures of faith are ever rewarded. When we come to tell the completed story of our lives, we shall have to record the fulfilment of all God's promises, and the accomplishment of all our prayers that were built on these. (*A. Maclaren, D.D.*)

Fear of inconsistency:—I. EZRA'S CONVICTION. 1. He was convinced that there were some men who sought God, and others who forsook Him. There were some who sought—(1) The knowledge of God. (2) The favour of God. (3) The glory of God. But there were others who cared for none of these things. So it is still. There are some who read the Bible and listen to the gospel with an earnest desire to know God, and who feel that to have God for their friend is to have the business of life accomplished; while there are others who turn a deaf ear to the invitations of Divine love, and who never seriously ask regarding the requirements of the law of God. The conviction of Ezra is that of every thoughtful good man. There is also the further conviction that this is the grand distinction. He who thinks of one neighbour being a seeker of God, and another a forsaker of God, looks at a distinction of the soul, and one which will prove lasting and important as the soul itself. 2. Ezra was convinced that God's hand for good was on the one class, and that His power and wrath were against the other. (1) The Bible declares this in the plainest terms (Gen. xviii. 23-25, &c.). (2) This is illustrated by the history of the Jews and of others with whom they had to do. (3) This truth is as evident now as it was then. Sloth and intemperance and profligacy lead to ruin, while diligence and sobriety lead to respectability and competence.

3. Ezra was convinced that he and his companions were among those who sought God, and on whom God's hand was for good. He calls Jehovah "our Lord." His language was intended to convey that they were in a state of favour with God, and that they knew this. From this we learn that a man may assure himself of God's friendship. II. EZRA'S DECLARATION OF HIS CONVICTION. This declaration was probably made when he requested authority to make his proposed journey to Jerusalem. At such a time he would feel under peculiar obligation to declare his belief in God, and his hope that Jehovah was his own Father, Protector, and Guide. This obligation every good man ought to feel. Christ requires us to confess Him. Such a profession is made by the observance of outward and positive institutions. When a man calls his family around him, sings a song of praise, and reads a portion of Scripture, and presents an offering of supplication and thanksgiving, he is telling his children and neighbours that he is a disciple of Jesus Christ. When he engages in the exercises of public worship, and especially when he takes his place at the communion-table, he is making an open and decided declaration that he is a disciple of Jesus. III. EZRA'S ANXIETY LEST HE SHOULD DO ANYTHING INCONSISTENT WITH THIS DECLARATION. Two instructive points require to be looked at. 1. There was real and great danger. 2. The inconsistency from which he shrank was more apparent than real. A good man believes that God renews the face of the earth, and covers the valleys with corn, but he does not neglect to plough and sow; he believes that God is a refuge and a strength, a sun and a shield, yet he takes food when he is hungry and medicine when he is sick; he does not expect that God is to protect and bless him apart from such means as prudence and experience may dictate. If Ezra had asked for a guard of soldiers, the request would not have been inconsistent with confidence in the power and faithfulness of God, but it would probably have appeared so to the king and his nobles, and he feared lest in this way the character of God should suffer. Things which are in themselves lawful are at times inexpedient, and a Christian man by doing such things may greatly injure both his comfort and usefulness. A sacrifice of principle and a wise consideration of times and circumstances are very different things, and to confound them shows only ignorance and folly. (*J. B. Johnston, D.D.*) *The good hand of God*.—It is a glimpse into a spiritual history which our text here presents to us. Of Ezra himself we have but a vague and shadowy idea; he has long since passed to the realm where storms and struggles are ended, and the mystery of life gives place to the clear sunlight of God's love. But within that strong, devout soul a great struggle was once fought out. The anxious questioning of his troubled and perplexed spirit was real enough then. And while it is possible to miss the true lesson and to push the teaching to a dangerous extreme, it will, if we penetrate to the spirit of the story, supply an answer to a modern problem and a truth fruitful for our modern lives. Ezra sought to satisfy the old equation between the Divine power and the human agency. He put to himself the familiar question—Is the use of means any the less a trusting in God? may not the means fall within the compass of God's plan of deliverance? And the issue of the struggle was this: at every hazard he must stand right with God and with his own heart, and therefore he refused to resort to an arm of flesh at all. We appear to have here a plain and blank refusal to use means. Some would have said—"Surely we may trust in the good hand of God, and the soldiers of the king." But to Ezra's scrupulous faith it presented an alternative. One or the other but not both. One or the other he must elect to have. He refused, not only because of the nature of the instrument, but also because it was an instrument. He said in effect, "Both we and our enemies are in the hands of God; it is His work, therefore, and not ours, to secure our safety and our welfare." Let us not suppose that we have here a unique instance of complete trust in God. It was when Jacob saw no human way of escape, and God had showed him his utter helplessness, that he went forth with a calm face and a brave heart to meet his brother Esau. It was when the horsemen were hard upon the children of Israel that the Lord began to trouble the Egyptians. There is nothing grander in this Book than the calm tramp of Moses on through the wilderness, with no attempt at self-defence, only the simple assurance, "The Lord shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace." Let me remind you of the boy who went to meet the mightiest of living warriors with a sling and a stone. Perhaps there were some who said, "Surely you can trust in God and put on the armour of Saul as well." But David felt that the armour was unnecessary if he had the shield of God's power. In all these examples we find a faith which rested in God and not in means of deliverance.

We may find it hard to understand Ezra, because our Christian character is often composed of one part of faith and ninety-nine parts of common sense, while his contained ninety-nine parts of faith and one part common sense. We trust in God, but feel safer if the mail-clad warriors are at our side; we know the twelve legions of angels are around us, but we are glad to feel the two swords concealed beneath our cloaks; we believe that the manna will fall day by day, yet we like to take bread with us lest it should fail to come. At the same time it is important to observe that it is the spirit of this incident we are to copy and not the form. As an instance of the rejection of means it is not an instance for all times and for all circumstances. Our Lord Himself taught us not to trust in God to do that which we may do for ourselves. The jars of water at Cana, the net cast into the sea, and the stone rolled away from the sepulchre, teach us that God will work through earthly instruments. But we maintain that failure oftener results from trusting in the means more than in God than from trusting in God and not in means. It is the deepest truth for the Christian worker that our churches, our ministrations, our methods, are but channels for the grace of God. We want not so much the eloquent tongue as the bended knee; not so much the crowded church as the crowded prayer meeting; not so much the beautiful temple as the glory of the Lord within. The great need now is not for better and more perfect machinery, but for a more consecrated spiritual life, and for a profounder trust in God, who can work with or without our machinery. It is, moreover, the secret of peace for the Christian life. But further, not only had Ezra the earnest longing to be right with God, but also to seem right. He was unwilling to put any stumbling-block in the way of the king. Though Artaxerxes might grant the request, might it not lessen his conception of the goodness and power of God? This age, which more than any other demands reality in its religion, demands the most careful seeming also. Tell men that we are pilgrims, and then let them see us making our habitations here; tell them that we are laying up the incorruptible riches, and then let them see us intent on the corruptible gain; tell them our confidence is in God, and then let them see us as hard in sorrow, as cynical in disappointment, as unbelieving in distress as themselves; tell them that we live for the unseen and the eternal, and then let them mark us caring for nothing we cannot see and clutch with our fingers; tell them that we confess a higher allegiance, and bow before a higher will, and then let them see us conforming our lives to their cold, worldly maxims, and we may say what we will, but they will treasure up our words as among the hollow falsities of a false creed. Let us be on our guard not to offend a watching world by the broad gulf between the spoken word and the visible life. (*J. H. Shakespeare, M.A.*)

Faith and prudence:—Ezra felt what Christian people still often feel, the conflict between prudence and faith. We observe—I. THAT AS A GRAND RULE IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE FAITH AND PRUDENCE MUST GO TOGETHER. The Scriptures give no countenance to presumptuous reliance on supernatural intervention. As a rule of life they bind us to take all human precautions against the various forms of mischief we have reason to apprehend. In this unbelieving generation there is not much reason to speak against excessive faith, but there is some reason. The workman gave as his reason for not going to church, "That religious people were hypocrites because they called the temple God's house, and yet put upon it a lightning rod." This worldly workman could not see that God's Church ought to recognise God's law, and act agreeably thereto; but he thought that he saw a glaring contradiction in this union of prudence and piety. And some noble men in the Church sympathise with this workman, and reject the securities which prudence would counsel. They have no faith in the band of soldiers. They leave their property uninsured; in times of disturbance they will not claim the protection of the magistrate; and in times of sickness they will not call the physician. That is, to a large extent, a serious mistake. As a rule we are to accept the band of soldiers which Ezra, in peculiar circumstances, rejected. We must not rashly cast ourselves into peril on the idea that angels have charge concerning us. We must not tempt the Lord our God. If devout men do not attend to the dictates of prudence they must suffer for it; and not only so, but they injure Christianity likewise. The truth of religion is based on false issues, and thus brought into suspicion or contempt. As the rule of life we must march through the desert with the band of soldiers. Our religion is not fatalism. "The good man guideth his affairs with discretion." Yet there are times—II. WHEN FAITH IN GOD MUST SUPERSEDE THE PROVISIONS OF ORDINARY PRUDENCE. When faith and prudence gave different counsel, Ezra chose to walk by faith, and we must all feel that he did right. The question is: When

are we to go beyond merely prudential considerations and venture all on the unseen power of God? When are we justified in neglecting policy and appealing to the higher law? We are "shut up" to "faith" when—1. Prudential action would most probably be construed as a denial of the Divine government. Ezra had told the king that "the hand of God was upon all them for good who feared Him." And now he considered that to reveal any anxiety for a guard of soldiers would appear to the heathen king like a practical denial of the overshadowing providence of Jehovah. On this ground he elected to brave the perils of the wilderness without the military escort. A band of soldiers would have hidden the Shepherd of Israel, Artaxerxes alone would have been seen; and so Ezra, with a fine spiritual instinct, saw the hour for simple trust had come, and by declining the soldiers left open the full view of God and His gracious and glorious government. A line of action is marked here for ourselves. To remove the scruples of the few we are not to take the lightning conductors from our temples and essay similar reformatations; but we must seek so to act that we satisfy the world generally that we do believe in the Divine superintendence and care. A worldly man believes only in the band of soldiers; and to let him know that we believe in something beyond we must sometimes be willing to act without the soldiers altogether. Are we not too anxious about material helps and visible securities? Has not the Church, by clinging so feverishly to visible resources and helps and defenders, given some sanction to the world's unbelief? Ezra blushed to ask Artaxerxes for help that might seem a denial of the power and presence of God. Are we sufficiently sensitive on this matter? Trapp says, "It is the ingenuity of saints to study God's ends more than their own." And if we are very jealous for the honour of God, and seek to uphold His government in the eyes of the world, we shall sometimes be ready to imperil our personal interest and safety for His sake; and let us be assured that when we act in this lofty spirit of faith and self-forgetfulness, we shall not be confounded. When—2. Prudential action would cause us to lean on worldly associations and resources. Artaxerxes was an idolater, and Ezra was anxious not to ask too much at his hands. It seemed inconsistent to Ezra that he should be soliciting a band of pagan soldiers to protect God's people and the treasures of God's temple. Policy drove him to find assistance in a suspicious quarter, and so he retired to the higher ground of simple trust in God. Here again we have a line of action marked out for us. We are the confessed servants of the Holy One of Israel, and prudence must not lead us to worldly alliances and dependence upon sinful circles. In our personal life we must observe this. We must beware of compromises with the world for the sake of our personal safety and aggrandisement. And in regard to God's Church we must observe this. Policy would often direct us to expect great things from the greatness, wealth, or wisdom of unregenerate men for the Church's sake. So far from seeking their assistance, we ought to be shy of their gold and their patronage. Thus did Ezra. And thus acted Paul and Silas (Acts xvi. 16-19). When prudence would lead us to seek for much, either for ourselves or for the Church, at the hands of unbelieving men, we must pause and follow the path faith indicates. Let us dare anything, suffer anything, rather than compromise our own character and the character of God in the eyes of the world by linking our fortunes and the fortunes of the Church with those who are joined to idols. When—3. Prudential action might embarrass the progress of God's kingdom. If Artaxerxes had detected any inconsistency in Ezra he might have ceased to be favourable to his cause and have prevented or delayed the return to Jerusalem. Rather than endanger the popularity and progress of the cause of God, Ezra was prepared to run great risks. Here another line of action is marked out for us. If prudence would circumscribe, fetter, or destroy the work of God, the time has come to appeal to loftier considerations. Calculating, cautious piety would condemn the act of Ezra as imprudent; but many imprudent things have been done or there would not have been so much Christianity in the world as there is; and many more imprudent things will have to be done before Christianity fills the world. Let us remember that God's kingdom is a supernatural one, and in its promotion we must often act with a boldness which could not be justified in the court of prudence. There is a holy venturesomeness in evangelisation which carries with it a far higher guarantee of success than do the pondered schemes of a rationalising statesmanship. Thus, then, there are times when we must renounce the counsellings of worldly wisdom and, stepping boldly into the darkness, cry with Ezra, "Help us, O Lord our God, for we rest on Thee." III. THE SEPARATION OF FAITH FROM PRUDENCE MUST BE EFFECTED ONLY IN THE SPIRIT OF SINCERE AND EARNEST DEPENDENCE UPON HEAVEN (ver. 23). No precipitancy, no levity, no

presumption. By fasting and prayer they obtained the assurance that God would honour their faith and preserve them. Not lightly must we discard ordinary defences and helps. When we can do no other we must humbly, solemnly rest ourselves in the hands of God. The times come to us all when faith and policy give contradictory counsel. When such times come let us not be found wanting to our profession and our God. In many circumstances simple trust in God will prove to be the truest policy. In Heb. xi. 7 Noah's conduct in preparing the ark is spoken of as "prudence." "By his believing obedience he came to be at last the one who was truly prudent. A truth of great practical importance. He who like a child blindly follows the will of God, regardless of all consequences, is the one who is truly prudent, for he builds on the Eternal, and He will never allow His own to come to shame."—*Ebrard*. And on the contrary, policy leading God's people to rest on worldly men and means and measures, finally demoralises and betrays them (Isa. xxxi. 3). (*W. L. Watkinson*.)

Alliance with God:—We are like William of Orange, with a few followers and an empty purse, making war against the master of half the world, with the mines of Peru for a treasury. But like William, too, when questioned concerning our resources, we can reply, "Before we took up this cause we entered into a close alliance with the King of Kings." Those on the Lord's side are on the winning side. He never has, and never will, lose a battle. (*David Gracey*.)

God's protection:—Pastor Oncken was forbidden by the burgo-master of Hamburg from holding religious meetings. "Do you see that little finger?" said the burgo-master; "as long as I can move that finger, so long will I put down the Baptists." "Yes," said Oncken, "I see your little finger, and I see also the great arm of God; and whilst that arm is lifted on our behalf, your little finger will have little terror for us."

Want of faith in God manifested:—Mr. G. J. Holyoake, in his "Sixty Years of an Agitator's Life," gives an interesting account of the Zulus who converted Bishop Colenso. Robert Ryder, a secular carpenter, was employed by the bishop to build his church and school-house in Natal. Ryder sent Mr. Holyoake several photographs of the actual Zulus who accomplished the conversion, long before the change was heard of in England. The Zulu workers under Ryder were conversed with by the bishop daily. They were remarkably shrewd in argument. They remarked upon the fact that the bishop had a room built in the rear of his church, in which he stored an eighteen-pounder. They knew what that cannon was for, and they thought that the bishop, fair-spoken as he was, did not place his ultimate reliance on the "Good Father," in whom he told them to trust.

Faith in God:—A century ago William Carey entered Nottingham with the thought in his heart, from which he preached the following day in a sermon which really originated the Baptist Missionary Society: "Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God." It was a very simple thing. It was very memorable. It was one of those inspirations that illumine as by a single flash the whole realm of thought. "Expect great things from God." Looking back over a hundred years, it was interesting to note upon what Carey based his expectations. Not on human resources, not on wealth, not on eloquence. Those few men who gathered together at Kettering had no worldly backing. They were obscure men in the extreme. With scarcely an exception they were quite unknown outside their own immediate neighbourhood. The wise and prudent in the Christian world doomed the enterprise to ignominious failure. With one exception, there was not a man of any mark in London who would have anything to do with it, and when a meeting was held to consider the advisability of forming an auxiliary, the idea was negatived by an overwhelming majority. But Carey believed in God. Doubts, unlikelihoods, impossibilities, vanished from his mind. And what has been the result of this faith? During the last hundred years, wherever the missionary had gone God had given testimony to the word of His grace by signs and wonders as marvellous as miracle. As in no former age the world lay open, aye, and opened-minded to the Gospel. (*J. Culross*.)

Fearlessness of the godly:—"I go up alone," General Gordon wrote, as he started from Cairo to Khartoum, "with an Infinite Almighty God to direct and guide me; and I am so called to trust in Him as to fear nothing, and, indeed, to feel sure of success."

A lesson of faith:—I was passing one of the busiest spots in the City of London, opposite the Royal Exchange. Here numerous turnings meet, and pour their mighty burden of vehicular traffic in bewildering streams. As the cabs, carriages, carts and waggons hastened along I could not help thinking what need there was for care in crossing, and how dangerous at that busy hour a false step would be. With such thoughts, my attention was attracted by something that seemed entirely out of harmony with

the whole surroundings. Right in the midst of the danger, at a time when the traffic was most bewildering, I saw a woman crossing the street. She was pushing a perambulator, not eagerly or excitedly trying to reach the other side, but with perfect calmness, and apparently without fear. What was the explanation? A City policeman held her arm, and she relied upon him. And shall we not place the same confidence in our Guide, and though dangers and difficulties, and trials and temptations surround us, shall we not trust Him perfectly who is able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy? Shall we not disdain to fear, knowing that we are protected and sustained by the everlasting arm? (*Signal*.) *Luther's courage*:—Luther's words in the first struggles of his public ministry have the sacred anxiety, the solemn confidence, and almost the language, of the apostle: "I am compassed with no guards, but those of heaven. I live in the midst of enemies who have legal power to kill me every hour. But this is the way in which I comfort myself: I know that Christ is Lord of all; and that the Father hath put all things under His feet, among the rest, the wrath of the emperor and of all evil spirits. If it please Christ that I should be slain, let me die in His name. If it do not please Him, who shall slay me?" *Definition of faith*:—Phillips Brooks gave a definition of faith so true and helpful to sinners needing salvation, that I reproduce it. "Forsaking All, I Take Him." It will be noticed that the initial letters spell "Faith"; and what I want you to do to-night is to "forsake all and take Him." It would be a good thing if every one present were to write on the fly-leaf of their Bibles those beautiful words, "Forsaking all, I take Him." (*W. R. Bradlaugh*.) **The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him: but His power and His wrath is against all them that forsake Him.**—*Contrasts*:—I. A contrast of HUMAN CHARACTER. II. A contrast of DIVINE TREATMENT. Conclusion—1. How solemnly man's destiny is in his own hands, or, more correctly, in his own choice. "Deeds are destiny; character is fate." 2. In this world character may be changed (*Hos. xiv. 1, 2, 4.*) (*William Jones*.) *Seeking the Lord, and its advantages*:—We are directed—I. To SEEKING GOD AND ITS ADVANTAGES. 1. Seeking God denotes—(1) A consciousness of our need of Him. (2) Earnest and fervent prayer to Him (*ver. 23*). (3) Coming to Him in the way of His appointment. (4) To labour in all things to have His approbation. 2. The advantages to those who thus seek Him. "The hand of our God is upon all," &c. The hand of His—(1) Pardoning mercy. (2) Delivering power. (3) Providing goodness. (4) Heavenly guidance. (5) Sustaining grace. (6) Manifest providence. II. FORSAKING GOD AND ITS ATTENDANT EVILS. Learn—1. The value of true religion. 2. The awfulness of apostasy. 3. The necessity of both vigilance and perseverance (*Heb. iii. 12; iv. 10-13*). (*Jabez Burns, D.D.*)

Vers. 24-30. And weighed unto them the silver and the gold, and the vessels.—*The guardianship of the sacred treasures*:—I. THE TREASURES TO BE GUARDED. 1. Valuable in themselves. 2. Valuable as being consecrated to God. 3. Valuable as being the spontaneous gifts of friends and well wishers. II. THE GUARDIANS OF THE TREASURES. III. THE CHARGE TO THE GUARDIANS OF THE TREASURES. IV. THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE GUARDIANSHIP OF THE TREASURES. Conclusion—1. Our subject speaks to ministers of the gospel (*1 Cor. iv. 1, 2; Titus i. 7, 9; 1 Tim. vi. 20; 2 Tim. i. 14*). 2. To all who have charge of public funds or the property of others. 3. To all men (*Matt. xxv. 14-30*). (*William Jones*.) *The charge of the pilgrim priests*:—Without being unduly fanciful, I think I may venture to take these words as a type of the injunctions which are given to us Christian people, and to see in them a picturesque representation of the duties that devolve upon us in the course of our journey across the desert to the temple-home above. I. Consider: THE PRECIOUS TREASURE ENTRUSTED TO OUR KEEPING. 1. The treasure is first our own selves, with all that we are and may be under the humiliating and quickening influence of His grace and spirit. That which we carry with us—the infinite possibilities of these awful spirits of ours, the tremendous faculties which are given to every human soul, and which, like a candle plunged into oxygen, are meant to burn far more brightly under the stimulus of Christian faith and the possession of God's truth, are the rich deposit committed to our charge. The precious treasure of our own natures, our own hearts, our own understandings, wills, consciences, desires—keep these until they are weighed in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem. 2. The treasure is next—This great word of salvation, once delivered to the saints, and to be handed on without diminution or alteration to the generations that are to

come. Possession involves responsibility always. The word of salvation is given to us. If we go tampering with it, by erroneous apprehension, by unfair usage, by failing to apply it to our own daily life, then it will fade and disappear from our grasp. It is given to us in order that we may keep it safe, and carry it high up across the desert as becomes the priests of the most high God. II. Next, THE COMMAND, THE GUARDIANSHIP THAT IS HERE SET FORTH. Watch ye and keep them. That is to say, watch in order that ye may keep. This involves—1. Unslumbering vigilance. 2. Lowly trust. 3. Punctilious purity. It was fitting that the priests should carry the things that belonged to the temple. No other hands but consecrated hands had a right to touch them. To none other guardianship but the guardianship of the possessors of a symbolic and ceremonial purity could the vessels of a symbolic and ceremonial worship be entrusted; and to none others but the possessors of real and spiritual holiness can the treasures of the true temple, of an inward and spiritual worship be entrusted, "Be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord," said Isaiah long after. The only way to keep our treasure undiminished and untarnished, is to keep ourselves pure and clean. 4. Constant use of the treasure. Although the vessels borne through the desert by those priests were used for no service during the march, they weighed just the same when they got to the end as at the beginning. But if we do not use the vessels that are entrusted to our care they will not weigh the same. There never was an unused talent yet, but when it was taken out and put into the scales it was lighter than when it was committed to the keeping of the earth. Gifts that are used fructify. Capacities that are strained to the uttermost increase. Service strengthens the power of service; and just as the reward of work is more work, the way for making ourselves fit for bigger things is to do the things that are lying by us. The blacksmith's arm, the sailor's eye, the organs of any piece of handicraft, as we all know, are strengthened by exercise, and so it is in the higher region. III. THE WEIGHING IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD. Though it cannot be that we shall meet the trial and the weighing of that day without many a flaw and much loss, yet we may hope that by His precious help and His pitying acceptance we may lay ourselves down in peace at last, saying, "I have kept the faith," and may be awakened by the word "Well done, good and faithful servant." (*A. Maclaren, D.D.*) From Ahava to Jerusalem:—This illustrates the pilgrimage of the Christian. I. THE SETTING OUT FROM AHAVA. 1. From captivity to liberty. 2. From exile to their ancestral home. 3. From the land of idolatry to the scene of true worship. II. THE PROGRESS ON THE JOURNEY. III. THE ARRIVAL AT JERUSALEM. This was characterised by—1. Grateful rest. 2. Joyful welcome. (*William Jones.*)

CHAPTER IX.

VERS. 1-4. Doing according to their abominations.—*The good man's sorrow over the people's sin*:—Learn—1. Separation from the world is obligatory upon the true Christian. 2. Sin in others should be regarded by the true Christian with unfeigned sorrow and reprobation of the sin. 3. Sin in the avowed people of God is especially heinous and mournful. 4. It behoves Christians to give all diligence to walk holily and unblamably before God and before men. (*Ibid.*)

VERS. 5-15. And at the evening sacrifice I rose up from my heaviness.—*Ezra's confession of the people's sin*:—We have here—I. DEEP PERSONAL SHAME AND SORROW ON ACCOUNT OF THE SINS OF THE PEOPLE. II. HUMBLE CONFESSION OF THE SINS OF THE PEOPLE. III. A SOLEMN ANTICIPATION OF THE CONSEQUENCE OF THE CONTINUANCE OF THE SINS OF THE PEOPLE. 1. Continuance in sin would lead to their utter end as a community. 2. That such a consequence of the continuance of sin would be just (ver. 15). 3. That such a consequence of the continuance of sin was to be dreaded. Learn—1. The great evil of sin. 2. The grand hope of the sinner (Psa. cxxx. 3, 4, 7; 1 John i. 9). 3. The right relation of the good man to sin. (*Ibid.*) *Ezra's humiliation for the sins of the people*:—I. THE REASON OF HIS SORROW. He regarded their sin—1. As being a violation of an express command (vers. 10-12; Deut. 2, 3). 2. As having an evident tendency to bring the people back to idolatry. II. THE EXPRESSION OF HIS SORROW. (*C. Simeon, M.A.*)

And now for a little space grace hath been shewed from the Lord our God.—*Ezra's address*:—I. THE GRACE ISRAEL HAD EXPERIENCED. II. THE EXALTED POSITION TO WHICH THEY HAD BEEN RAISED. III. THE BLESSING CONNECTED WITH THESE PRIVILEGES. Let the subject be—I. A test of character. 2. An appeal as to our position. 3. A question as to our desires. 4. An exhortation. (*Jabez Burns, D.D.*)

Ver. 12. Now, therefore, give not your daughters unto their sons.—*Forbidden marriages*:—I. THEY ARE OPPOSED TO THE EXPRESS COMMAND OF GOD (2 Cor. vi. 14). II. THEY ARE INCONSISTENT WITH THE MOST SACRED ASPECTS AND ENDS OF MARRIAGE. III. THEY IMPERIL THE SALVATION OF THE SOUL. IV. THEY ARE INIMICAL TO WISE AND HARMONIOUS HOME GOVERNMENT. V. THEY ARE DETRIMENTAL TO THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILDREN OF THE MARRIAGE. (*William Jones.*)

VERS. 13-14. And after all that is come upon us for our evil deeds, and for our great trespass, seeing that Thou our God hast punished us less than our iniquities deserve.—*The goodness of God and the aggravations of sin*:—We find in Scripture upon the most solemn occasions of humiliation that good men have always testified a thankful sense of the goodness of God to them. The greater and more lively sense we have of the goodness of God to us, the more we shall abhor ourselves, nothing being more apt to melt us to tears of repentance than the consideration of great and undeserved mercies vouchsafed to us. The goodness of God doth naturally lead to repentance. In the text we have—I. A CASE SUPPOSED, WHICH INVOLVES—1. That sin is the cause of all our sufferings. 2. That great sins have usually a proportionable punishment. 3. That all the punishments which God inflicts in this life do fall short of the demerit of our sins. 4. That God many times works very great deliverances for those who are very unworthy of them. 5. That we are but too apt, even after great judgments and after great mercies, to relapse into our former sins. 6. That it is good to take notice of the particular sins that have brought the judgments of God upon us. II. A SENTENCE AND DETERMINATION IN THE CASE—"Wouldest not Thou be angry with us till Thou hadst consumed us, so that there should be no remnant nor escaping?" This question implies a strong affirmative. 1. It is a fearful aggravation of sin after great judgments and great deliverances to return to sin, and especially to the same sins again. (1) To return to sin after great judgments is an argument of great obstinacy in evil. The longer Pharaoh resisted the judgments of God, the more was his wicked heart hardened, till at last he arrived at a monstrous degree of hardness. And we find that after God had threatened the people of Israel with several judgments, He tells them that if they "will not be reformed by all these things, He will punish them seven times more for their sins." What a sad complaint doth Isaiah make of the people of Israel growing worse for judgments (Isa. i. 4, 5; ix. 13; xxvi. 11). There is a particular brand set upon Ahaz because affliction made him worse (2 Chron. xxviii. 2). (2) When sin is committed after great mercies and deliverances vouchsafed to us is an argument of great ingratitude. This we find recorded as a heavy charge upon the people of Israel (Judg. viii. 34, 35). How severely doth Nathan reproach David on this account (2 Sam. xii. 7-9). And he was angry with Solomon for the same reason (1 Kings xi. 9). However we may slight the mercies of God, He keeps a strict account of them. It is noted as a blot of Hezekiah that "he returned not again according to the benefits done unto him." Ingratitude to God is so unnatural and monstrous that we find Him appealing against us for it to the inanimate creatures (Isa. i. 2). And then He goes on and upbraids them with the brute creatures as being more grateful to men than men are to God (Isa. i. 3; xxvi. 10). There is no greater evidence of an untractable disposition than not to be wrought upon by kindness, not to be melted by mercies, not to be obliged by benefits, not to be tamed by gentle usage. Nay, God expects that His mercies should lay so great an obligation upon us that even a miracle should not tempt us to be unthankful (Deut. xiii. 1, 2). (3) To return to the same sins after great mercies and judgments is an argument of a perverse and incorrigible temper. With what resentment God speaks of the ill returns the children of Israel made to Him for the great mercy of their deliverance from Egypt (Judg. x. 11-14). Upon such an occasion well might the prophet say, "Thine own wickedness shall correct thee and thy sins shall reprove thee," &c. (Jer. ii. 19). 2. To return to the same sins again after great judgments and deliverances is a sad presage of ruin to a people. (1) Because this doth ripen the sins of a nation (Gen. xv. 16). When neither the mercies nor the judgments of God

will bring us to repentance, we are then fit for destruction (Rom. ix. 22). (2) Because this incorrigible temper shows the case of such persons to be desperate and incurable (Isa. i. 5; Matt. xxiii. 37, 38). When God sees that all the means which He can use do prove ineffectual, He will then give over a people as physicians do their patients when they see that nature is spent and their case past remedy. When men will not be the better for the best means that Heaven can use, God will then leave them to reap the fruit of their own doings and abandon them to the demerit of their sin. (*Abp. Tillotson.*) *The great trespass*:—I. THAT JUDGMENTS ARE SENT AS THE PUNISHMENT OF SIN. 1. The unvarying testimony of Scripture is that transgression and punishment are closely united (Gen. ii. 17; vi. 13; xviii. 20, 21). Throughout the entire history of Israel this fact was continually brought out into distinct recognition. 2. The "great trespass" deplored in the text. When God gave the law against intermingling with the nations he said, "for they will turn away thy sons from following Me that they may serve other gods." The fatal counsel of Balaam to Balak was to seduce Israel into alliance with the Moabites. And it is recorded of Solomon, "when he was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods." Whatever, therefore, tended to lead them into idolatry was to be regarded as an evil of the deadliest character; and as nothing tended so powerfully to draw away their hearts as this forbidden affinity with the heathen, it might well be termed their "great trespass." II. THAT DIVINE JUDGMENTS ARE MINGLED WITH MERCY. Ezra's acknowledgment was also made by Nehemiah, "Nevertheless, for Thy great mercy's sake, Thou didst not utterly consume them; for Thou art a gracious and merciful God." In the same spirit of grateful humility Jeremiah says, "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed." The Psalmist sings in a similar strain, "He hath not dealt with us according to our sins nor rewarded us according to our iniquities." Sinners live under a respite—their punishment is intended to alarm, not to crush them. III. THE DANGER OF DISREGARDING DIVINE JUDGMENTS. The history of the Jews is a dark narrative of mercies and ingratitude; exhortations and disobedience; warnings and neglect; judgments and impenitence; judicial blindness and total rejection. God's dealings with Israel were typical of His dealings with the Church at large and with its individual members. Religious privileges are sometimes long continued to a Church; but when it proves unfruitful, then is fulfilled—"The kingdom of God is taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof." The Churches at Ephesus, Sardis, and Laodicea have perished. The Spirit strives long with the disobedient; but there is a time when He ceases. As Christians we are under obligations to renounce the world and all familiar intercourse with those whose character and conduct might prove a snare to beguile us into sin (2 Cor. vi. 14-17). In almost every similitude employed in the Scriptures to characterise the situation and deportment of believers, we find something bearing a pointed allusion to this matter. They are called a "little flock"; "brethren living together in the same family"; "a garden enclosed"; "a lily among thorns"; "hidden ones"; a peculiar people; "the light of the world" shining amid the surrounding darkness. The Christian is represented as a "soldier" enlisted under the banner of the "Captain of his salvation," and who obviously cannot discharge his duty if he consort with his Master's enemies. He is a pilgrim who has bidden adieu to all the friends and follies of his youth, and who has set out alone on his wilderness path. In all these figures the idea of separation from the world is clearly implied. Separation from the world is not the supercilious distance of the haughty Pharisee. Isaiah speaks of a people which say "stand by thyself, come not near to me, for I am holier than thou." But what is said of them? "These are a smoke in My nose, a fire that burneth all the day." Neither is it a superstitious exclusion from society. The duties and business of active life must be attended to. The interchanges of civility and kindness must not be neglected. Our Lord and His apostles have left us an example in this matter. But there is a separation which, as the avowed friends of the Redeemer, we must maintain (Matt. x. 37, 38). We must come out of every society where our consistency may be compromised, where our character may be suspected, where our personal piety may be invaded, and our conscience blunted. (*David Arnott, D.D.*) *The voices of the soul in view of sin and of salvation from it*:—Under the influence of a great grief we have here the soul uttering two voices. I. THE VOICE OF CONSCIENCE IN VIEW OF SIN. Conscience says—1. That man himself is responsible for his sins. "Our evil deeds and our great trespass." There is a strong tendency in man to charge his sins on others. (1) Sometimes on God Himself. (2) Sometimes on his fellow

human creatures, as Adam did (Gen. iii. 12). (3) Sometimes on the devil (Gen. iii. 13). But an awakened conscience says with emphasis, "Our evil deeds and our great trespass." Conscience speaks—2. Of the great evil of sin. Man is prone to make his sins look less than they really are. Conscience, like the Divine commandment, shows the "exceeding sinfulness of sin." Conscience says—3. That punishment is connected with sin. There is punishment connected with the transgression of every law of God, both in the natural and in the moral world. God has so made His laws that they punish every one that transgresseth them themselves. Punishment may also follow sin in the world to come without the direct interposition of God. Conscience says—4. That sin is not punished in this world according to its ill desert. This is accounted for—(1) Because this is a world in which good and evil exist. (2) Because there is more mercy than justice in this world. The scale is never level when there is more weight in one end than in the other. The cause of the lightning and thundering in the natural world is the loss of the equilibrium in the air. So in the moral world, we see it sometimes much disturbed, and that in consequence of there being more mercy here than justice. Justice in this life is like an eternal sea kept within its bounds with only a few streams running over its banks just to show that it exists, while mercy is like an eternal ocean deluging the world. II. THE VOICE OF WONDER IN VIEW OF GOD'S SALVATION FROM SIN. This wonder is caused by two things. 1. By the greatness of the deliverance. This is seen—(1) In its origin. (2) In the way in which it has been brought about. (3) In the vastness of the blessings which it brings to man. 2. By looking at the awful consequences of rejecting this salvation. Ezra is confounded here by thinking of the people's transgression and the awful consequences that would follow if they would not repent and seek forgiveness (ver. 14). "But what shall be the end of them that obey not the gospel of God?" (*Homilist.*) *A past reviewed, a future contemplated* (a thanksgiving sermon for the removal of cholera).—I. A PAST REVIEWED. We are reminded—1. That the distresses of a nation come upon them for their sins. Now on this point we must be careful to use nothing but the language of holy sobriety. We reason, indeed, neither wisely, nor safely, nor honourably to God, when we make every national calamity stand in some definite retributive relation to certain national sins. We have no data for establishing such a relation either in reason or in Scripture, or in the constituted order of moral government. Thus, if a country should lose its colonies through misrule or bad government, or if an army should be cut up through a general's inconsiderate rashness, or if our emigrant population should perish by hundreds through being sent out in vessels that were not seaworthy, or if a malaria should infect a neighbourhood where all sanitary precautions have been neglected, it were a manifest misuse of terms to call any one of these resulting evils by the name of a Divine judgment. They are the ordinary consequences of a broken law. Still, while it is neither safe nor Scriptural to interpret as direct Divine visitations what are manifestly only the immediate and perceived result of human misdoing, it is just as bad philosophy to disown the traces of God's hand in calamities where the efficient causes are more occult and indirect and far-removed and untraceable. This world is His world; we must not cast Him out of its management. The pestilence is His servant, not His vicegerent; the strict dispenser of His judgment, not the uncontrolled executioner of its own. Why, I could just as soon be an idolater as one of our modern worshippers of second causes; for, if the one bows the knee to Juggernaut, the other seems to build a temple to the plague. But we have not so learned the rod, or so misinterpreted its harsh but emphatic voice. If Providence does travel beyond its wonted cycles, if the Lord does come out of His place, we know what it is for; it is "to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity." Our state is probationary, but God will have some smaller reckonings with us now. "All this came upon us," said Ezra, "for our evil deeds and for our great trespass." 2. When God visits a nation for their sins, He always mingles mercy with His chastisements. "Less than our iniquities deserve!" Why, what do they deserve? What do our murmurings, and crimes, and cruelties, and wicked blasphemies deserve? What do we deserve for the licentiousness of our pleasures, the covetousness of our gains, the stint measure of our charities, the worldliness of our homes? What do our rich men deserve for their pride, or our poor men for their profaneness? What do patriots deserve for their lukewarm love, or Christian rulers for enforcing a breach of the Divine commandments? Oh! in all this we see how far apart are offence and chastisement, the nation's sins and the nation's scourge. II. A POSSIBLE FUTURE. Two points are here insisted upon. 1. Sins

after warning are the worst sins. To go on committing the same sins after judgments and chastisements evinces an obstinacy in evil, a stoutness of heart, a baseness of ingratitude, and almost a defiance of God. A continuance in sin under such circumstances shows a man's spirit to be intractable. Alarm him with warnings, he will not be affected by them; load him with benefits, he will not be obliged by them. His heart is like an anvil, strokes only make it more hard.

2. Judgments after deliverance are the worst judgments. There is an awful expression used by the apostle, "vessels of wrath fitted for destruction." When God has used all merciful expedients to no purpose—when judgments awake no terror, and deliverances inspire no gratitude—then He takes a final leave of us; we must reap the fruit of our own doings. (*Daniel Moore, M.A.*) *Sorrowing for the sins of others*:—I propound two things: First, an indictment preferred by Ezra against Israel; secondly, his pleading it for God against themselves. In the first he remembers God's mercy and their rebellion. God's mercy is laid down in the thirteenth verse, and that three ways. First, he shows that they were not punished without cause; secondly, that God punished them less than they deserved; thirdly, that He had totally delivered them. Their rebellion is comprised in the fourteenth verse, in which there are two parts: first, the sin; secondly, the punishment. The sin is laid down, first generally, "Should we again break Thy commandments?" Secondly particularly, "and join in affinity with the people of these abominations?" Then follows the punishment. First, God will be angry; secondly, there is the degree of His anger, He will not leave consuming till all be destroyed. Before we handle the particulars there are two things in general. The first is out of the party, which was Ezra; the second is out of the course he takes, and that is humbling himself in God's presence. 1. For THE PARTY, it is EZRA. Ye shall read in this book that he was a man that set his heart to seek the Lord; neither did he this only himself, but sought by all possible means to incite others to follow his godly example. Had all Israel been such as he, they needed not to have feared judgments coming upon them. Doctrine: Good men, though they be at peace with God, find cause of sorrow for other men's sins. Ye shall see this proved in the Scripture. The Spirit of God calls Lot a righteous man—yet this righteous man's soul was vexed from day to day with the unclean conversation of the Sodomites (2 Pet. ii. 8). The like we see in Moses (Exod. xxxii. 19). It was so with the prophet (1 Sam. xv. 35). The like we see in David (Psa. cxix. 136). May some man say, "What were the sins of the world to David?" It is true they were none of his, yet he thinks himself bound to grieve for them, because he knew they were displeasing to his Maker. We see the same in good Jeremiah (Jer. ix. 1, 2; xiii. 17). O blessed Saviour, Thou didst mourn for the hardness of men's hearts (Mark iii. 5; Luke xix. 41, 42). Use 1. It shall be to let us see the stupidity of the sons of Belial. Though they have most cause to weep and mourn, yet they live in jollity and merriment, and are mere strangers to all sadness. Some of these stick not to say, What hath any man to do to weep for their sins? and that by their impieties they trouble none but their own souls. But I tell thee, O wretch, thou troublest not only thine own house and soul, but thou troublest all Israel, thou givest the saints of God occasion to be pensive for that which makes thee jocant and glad; and happy is it for thee that there be such as Noah, Lot, Samuel, and David to mourn for thee; for were it not that some did mourn for thy profaneness, thou shouldst not live again to commit it. Use 2. This may answer a common objection which is put to the saints, because they be sad. I would have you know that it is not holiness which makes them sad, but the profaneness of the world (Psa. cxx. 5). Use 3. Lastly, according to the practice of Ezra, though we have made our peace with God, let us mourn for the wickedness of others; every one knows what a cause there is for this. Religion is out of fashion, and none are so esteemed as fashion-mongers, they be your only men now in credit. First, it is piety to mourn for the sins of others. Shall we hear and see God to be dishonoured and not grieve for it? Piety cannot lodge in that breast where such an ill spirit inhabits. A man will and ought to grieve when his friend is wronged (John xv. 15). Secondly, pity requires this duty at our hands. I read of Marcellus, the Roman, that entering a city which he had gained by composition after a long siege, he burst forth into tears; one that stood beside him demanded why he wept. Saith he, "I cannot choose but weep to see so many thousand led into captivity." Shall a heathen weep for the captivity of men's bodies? and shall not Christians mourn for their sins which are enough to enthrall souls? Thirdly, if we do not mourn for other men's sins we make them our own.

Lastly, we should be moved to this duty by the blessing which attends it. What saith our blessed Saviour (Matt. v. 4)? And in Ezek. ix. 4 the Lord gives command to spare them in Jerusalem, that did "sigh and cry for the abominations done in the midst thereof." II. THE COURSE WHICH EZRA TAKES—and that is humbling himself by confession, weeping, and supplication. The main receipt in time of affliction is humiliation. This will appear in God's people (2 Chron. xx. 3; Eph. iv. 16; Jonah iii. 5; Jer. xiv. 20; Joel ii. 12). The people of God have done the same when the sword hath been amongst them; this we find in Josh. vii. 6. So likewise in the case of the whole Church (Hos. vi. 1). The grounds they went upon were these two: First, they knew it was God's commandment—that place in Zeph. ii. 1, 2, is notable to this purpose. Secondly, the saints were sure that sin was the cause of all their miseries; that being the Achan which troubled the whole host, and the Jonah endangering the whole ship. What shall we think of a number of desperate wretches in the world who, when they should be humbled under God's afflicting hand, sin more and more and more against Him? This was the sin of Ahaz (2 Chron. xxviii. 22; Isa. lvii. 17). We now descend to the particulars as they were laid down. We begin with the indictment preferred by Ezra against Israel, in which is remembered God's mercy and their rebellion. God's mercy is laid down in the thirteenth verse, and that three ways. First, he shows that they were not punished without cause; secondly, that God punished them less than they deserved; thirdly, that He had totally delivered them. First, for the first particular in the gradation of God's mercy, "Thou our God hast punished us"—that is, Thou hast punished us deservedly. Tyrants will and do punish men without cause; but the Judge of all the world never proceeds to punish but when He is provoked. In that Ezra saith, "Seeing that Thou our God hast punished us." Take notice in the first place of this observation. Whatsoever is the instrument, God is the author of the punishment (Isa. xlv. 7; Amos iii. 6). In 1 Cor. xi. 32 St. Paul there labours to persuade the Corinthians that God chastened them; and David saith (Psa. xxxix. 9), "I was dumb, and opened not my mouth, because Thou didst it." This may inform us what is the ground of all the impatience in the world. There be a number which repine when God's hand is upon them. What is the reason? They stick in the second causes, and look so much on the lower links of the chain, that they forget Him that hath the top of it in His hand. Secondly, here is a use of admonition. Ever look up to God in all thy afflictions. Look to Him in thy fever, in thy ague, in the plague. Lastly, when the Lord's hand is upon us, and that we would have it removed, the nearest way we can take is to have recourse to God by prayer. God doth never punish any without desert (Gen. xviii. 25). We should ever justify God in all the judgments He brings upon us. The saints of God have done this in all times; thus did David (Psa. cxix. 75). In the second place, seeing God punishes none without cause, let it teach us patience under His afflicting hand. Further, we may observe that Ezra speaks not only of sin in general, but of "a great trespass." What was it? It was the people mingling themselves with the heathen. The doctrine arising from hence is thus much. When God arises to judgment, He ever sets Himself against the foul sins of men. Wilt thou deal otherwise with God Almighty than with thy physician? When he comes to thee in thy sickness thou wilt conceal nothing from him, but tell him how it is with thee in every particular. And yet when thou comest to confess thy sins to thy God, thou concealdest those capital sins which have most offended Him. (*Josiah Shute, B.D.*) *Divine cordials*:—We come now to the second amplification of God's mercy. Ezra had said that God had dealt mercifully with them. How proves he the mercy of God? He proves it thus, because that when He punished them it was less than they deserved. Here is one word joined with punishing, which I would have you take notice of, "Thou our God hast punished us." Herein he is a pattern to us when at any time we come to confess our sins before God. "Our God" intimates a strong relation and affection. Certainly, when he saith thus, he knew there was hope of God's being reconciled to them again, giving us thereby to understand what is required of men in the confession of sin. A man must not only, as David, "water his couch with his tears" (Psa. vi. 6); nor with Peter, "go out and weep bitterly" (Matt. xxvi. 75); nor with the woman which was a sinner in the city, "wash Christ's feet with our tears" (Luke vii. 38); nor, secondly, must he only with a great deal of self shame confess his sin, as did Ezra in this chapter, and the poor publican (Luke xviii. 13). Thirdly, nor must he only confess his sins with anger, as did Job (Job xlii. 6) and Ephraim (Hos. xiv. 8). But, lastly, he must confess them with faith and confidence; that is, so to aggravate his sins before

God as not to let go his hold in God (Dan. ix. 9). Let the consideration of this teach us to take out this needful lesson. Some there be that confess their sins, but it is with despair; thus did Cain and Judas. But for ourselves, let us confess our sins with hope that God will pardon us, and with the servants of Benhadad let us address ourselves to Him, and say, "We have heard that Thou, who art the King of Israel, art a merciful King." Let us never despair. God may love and yet punish. I desire from my soul that people would be persuaded of this. I confess it is a hard saying, and men will hardly be drawn to believe it, especially when the affliction is smart. How often did Job think God his enemy when His hand was heavy upon him! So in David, all men knew that he loved his Absalom well, but yet when he turns rebel he must take up arms against him; yet, at the same time, he bids his men intreat the young man Absalom kindly. Now, can man punish and yet love? And shall not God do the same, who is fuller of mercy than the sea is of water? In the second place, it should teach every man to take heed of censuring any to be such as God hates, on whom God lays His afflicting hand. God doth not punish any of His so much as they deserve. Secondly, let us learn of our heavenly Father, to be merciful as He is merciful. The last amplification of God's mercy is, that He had delivered them—"Thou hast given us such a deliverance as this." Will some men say, "What deliverance was that?" It was the delivering of Israel from the Babylonish captivity, which lasted seventy years, and was a very great deliverance. There be certain deliverances which God bestows on men, for which they are to be more thankful than for others. It is true God is so great in the greatest that He is not little in the least, yet some are greater than others. Some of God's works are written in greater, some in smaller characters. It was not every deliverance which caused Hezekiah to pen a song, but it was God's adding a lease of fifteen years to his life when he thought himself past recovery. They were great deliverances that made the Jews keep their anniversaries, as the Feast of the Passover, of Tabernacles, and of Trumpets. Let me call upon you to reflect and to say with Ezra, "God hath given us such a deliverance as this." What a deliverance did God give unto us in this land at the entrance of good Queen Elizabeth of ever blessed memory, who restored true religion among us! As, therefore, at that time of need His mercy was great towards us, so let it appear in our lives that we are sensible of His extraordinary favour, by living holy and righteously all the days of our life. (*Ibid.*) **Should we again break Thy commandments, and join in affinity with the people of these abominations.**—*No affinity with abominations*.—I. OUR NATIONAL DUTY TO GOD. This may be viewed in three lights. 1. Of moral and Christian obligation. 2. Of Scripture precedent. 3. Of prophetic promise. II. THE ABOMINATIONS TO BE RENOUNCED. Christian idolatry and the Papacy of Rome. 1. It is unbelieving. True faith is blotted out by a blind credulity. 2. It is idolatrous. 3. It is self-righteous. 4. It is persecuting. 5. In its whole practice it denies the Father and the Son. III. THE KIND OF AFFINITY WHICH IS SINFUL AND FORBIDDEN. It is one of sympathy, of partial adoption, and of the direct patronage of idolatrous error. IV. THE AGGRAVATION OF OUR SIN BY FORMER MERCIES. (*T. R. Birks, M.A.*) *Sorrow for sin followed by amendment of conduct*.—In this verse we may take knowledge how Ezra justifies God's severity upon the precedence of man's sin. The verse divides itself into two parts: First, the sin; secondly, the punishment. The sin is laid down: First, generally, "Shall we return to break Thy commandments?" Secondly, particularly, "And join in affinity with the people of these abominations?" Then follows the punishment: First, "God will be angry"; secondly, there is the degree of His anger, "He will not leave consuming till all be destroyed." We begin with the sin in general: "Should we return to break Thy commandments?"—in the original it is "Should we return again to commit iniquities?"—which intimates to us that when God's hand was upon them it wrought them to amendment: from whence I note this much. That is sound repentance when a man so sorrows for his sin that he forsakes it. This lets us see the vanity of those who say they have repented of, and yet have not turned from their evil ways. It may be while God's hand was on them they repented. Secondly, as we say, we repent of our sins, so let us turn from them. This was the savoury counsel of Daniel to Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, break off thy sins by righteousness, and thine iniquities by showing mercy to the poor." It is possible for a man to turn from sin and yet be never the better, if he grieve not for it; and it is possible for a man to grieve for sin, and yet far enough from true repentance if he turn not from it. If any of us should have a servant that grieved for his offence, promising

no more to commit the like, and yet as soon as our back is turned should run into the same again, we would presently conclude that he did but dissemble. "Should we return to break Thy commandments?" The manner of Ezra's speaking intimates to us, that it is possible for a man to be engaged in sin when he hath had a taste of God's mercy; and if so, give me leave from hence to gather this observation. After the receipt of great mercies, God's children are apt to be engaged in great sins. See it made good in some instances. Was there ever a greater deliverance bestowed on any than that which the Lord afforded Noah, when he outrid that storm of the deluge in the ark, when all the world besides him and his were drowned? But soon after he forgot his great favour, and was overtaken with intemperance. So in the children of Israel, what a deliverance did God vouchsafe them when He freed them from Egyptian bondage! What may be the reason of this? First, it is from the corruption of our nature since the fall of Adam, which is so depraved thereby that we are apt to forget the mercy of God even then, when we have most cause to remember it. Secondly, it proceeds from the malice of the devil; for when he sees God to bestow great mercies on men, he then labours especially to engage them in transgression. And why so? That the mercies of God may be obscured by their unthankfulness. Let me persuade you, that as ye be sensible of God's mercies, so to watch over yourselves upon the receipt of them that ye may be thankful for them. And as the devil doth labour then to step in when God hath done men most good, so above all times labour at that time to be most thankful and obedient, that God may have His glory and you a sweet relish of His mercy. "Shall we break Thy commandments?" How shall we understand this "break Thy commandments"? How could it be otherwise? Doth any man live and not sin? And yet shall they for this be exposed to God's judgments? His meaning is, that if after so great mercy as God hath vouchsafed them they should fall into gross sins, then God should be just in punishing them. As therefore a man should avoid great sins, so also all lesser impieties. The heart of man should be against all sin, and he should have respect to all God's commandments, that if he chance to fall it may not be presumptuously, but by infirmity. "Shall we join in affinity with the people of these abominations?" Here I could observe how hateful the heathen and all their doings be unto God, as also how odious all gross sinners are in His pure eyes. In the Scripture ye shall find if the godly be compared to gold, the wicked are termed dross. Again, if the godly be termed sheep, the wicked are called goats; nay, in our text "they be abominable." So we may say of the wicked man, be he never so rich and honourable, if he be a gross sinner he is hateful to God. The Holy Ghost makes it a foul sin to join in affinity with the heathen; and, indeed, so it is, for God charges the contrary (Exod. xxxiv. 15, 16). And ye shall find that God hath followed those with punishments that have joined themselves to heathens. Esau married strange wives, to the great grief of his father and mother, and he was made the more profane by it. The like we see in Solomon. It was so with Samson, he would needs have the daughter of a Philistine to wife; what followed upon it? she proved his bane. Make no league with gross sinners, for there is much danger in it. First, the danger of suspicion. Let a man be never so good, yet if he associate himself with those that be bad, he will be thought as bad as they; for what will men say? "Birds of a feather fly together." Secondly, he runs the hazard of infection. All the rivers of the world run into the sea, but yet they cannot sweeten it, but are made brackish by it. And a wicked man is ten times more apt to corrupt a good man than he is to be wrought on by the conversation of a good man. Thirdly, there is a danger of a curse by consorting with wicked men. For as many ill men fare the better for one man, thus the household of Potiphar was blest for one Joseph; and all in the ship fared the better for Paul's presence. So many good men may sometimes fare the worse for one wicked person, thus for one Achan the whole host of Israel is discomfited. Besides, when a good man maintains inward familiarity with the wicked: First, he seems to approve and applaud their wickedness: secondly, it is a scandal to religion, and doth greatly prejudice weak Christians; thirdly, it is a great means to keep the wicked from repenting, for too much intimacy with them hardens them in their sin. We now come to the punishment: "Wouldst Thou not be angry with us till Thou hadst consumed us, so that there should be no remnant nor escaping?" First, here is God's anger in the first clause, "Wouldst Thou not be angry with us?" Secondly, we have the degree of His anger in the last words, "so that there should be no escaping." We begin with God's anger, "Wouldst Thou not be angry with us?" Out of this first clause I note two things for our instruction. The first is this:

great sins, after the receipt of great favours, are usually followed by great judgments. And wonder not at this, for it is a great dishonour to God that His favours should be slighted (Rom. ii. 4). The second observation arising from that clause, "Wouldst Thou not be angry with us till Thou hadst consumed us?" is this: there be degrees of God's wrath; it rises by little and little till it consume. This is proved in Lev. xxvi. There we find that as men's sins increase, so God's plagues shall increase; and if they persist in sin, He will plague them seven times more and seven times more. So in Psa. lxxviii. 38. Thus the wrath of God rises higher and higher. Could Rehoboam make his little finger as heavy as his father's loins? and could Nebuchadnezzar make his oven seven times hotter than it was before? and shall not God increase His wrath? Yes, He can at pleasure. One meets with a great number who, if they have been freed from an ague of which they had four or five fits, they presently say with Agag, "The bitterness is past, and they shall no more have it." What thinkest thou? Is not God able to visit thee again? In the second place, whosoever God's hand is upon us, let us know that He could lay much more upon us if He would. (*Josiah Shute, B.D.*)

Ver. 15. **O Lord God of Israel, Thou art righteous; for we remain yet escaped, as it is this day: behold, we are before Thee in our trespasses: for we cannot stand before Thee because of this.**—*Divine cordials*.—In this verse Ezra pleads guilty to the indictment, acknowledging God to be just, though He should renew His judgments afresh upon them. There be two things in it: First, his justifying God in these words, "O Lord God of Israel, Thou art righteous." Secondly, the reason which he gives for it: First, on God's part. He had used all possible means to bring them to reformation—"We remain yet escaped as at this day." Secondly, on their part. They were still in their trespasses; and therefore they were the fresh fuel of God's indignation. Before we come to these particulars, give me leave to speak a word or two of the style he gives God; he calls Him "Lord God of Israel." The title "Lord" signifies His greatness; "the God of Israel," His goodness. A fit preface for a prayer, for the word "Lord" is a term well befitting God. In the Holy Scripture He is said to be "strong in power, and wonderful in working." Let it comfort God's people: God is the Lord Almighty in power. What then shall be too hard for Him to perform with them? Lastly, it should teach us to stand in awe and not sin against God. So we come to the second, which is, that He is "the God of Israel." And if in the first He was the greatest, then in this He is the best. I know He is "the God of all the earth" (Psa. xxiv. 1); but more especially He is "the God of Israel." First, by a special and peculiar worship. To them above other people He revealed how He would be worshipped. Secondly, He is the God of Israel in regard to that special care He had of them. He was a wall of fire round about them to preserve them from their enemies. Thirdly, He is the God of Israel by a special reward which He hath promised them. He said to Abraham, "I am thy exceeding great reward." This that hath been said may assure God's children of His affection towards them. Secondly, methinks this should take off the edge of all persecutors. Is God the God of His people? and dare they touch that which is hallowed unto God? Will they meddle with the apple of His eye? Thirdly, methinks it should teach all persecutors and all wicked men to love the people of God. How are we affected with earthly things? If we know a man whom the king favours, how do we seek to get into his favour? We will do him any service to obtain it. And are not the saints of God His favourites? Lastly, is the Lord the God of Israel? Let Israel then behave themselves as God's people. What saith the Spirit of God in Deut. xxvi. 18; 1 Cor. vi. 20; Titus ii. 14? Now we come to the particulars in the text as we laid them down. First, for the justifying of God, "Thou art righteous." This hath been ever the practice of God's people; they have still confessed God to be just in what He hath brought upon them. Thus doth David (Psa. li. 4; cxix. 137). This lets us see how the world fails in this particular. When God lays His hand on men, how apt are they to dispute with God and say, Why doth He deal thus and thus with us? Who art thou, O man, that repliest to thy Maker? Secondly, let us always be persuaded of the justice of God in all His proceedings; for though we see not the reason why He doth this or that, yet there is good reason for it. We proceed now to the reason which he gives for justifying God: "For we remain yet escaped, as it is this day." As if he had said, "Thy goodness is demonstrate; he that runs may read it." In general judgments which God brings upon the world, there are still some escaping. When God sent the deluge upon the world, Noah and

his family perished not. In the fiery shower which God rained on Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot and his daughters perished not. What is the ground of this? First, all God's ways are interveined with mercy. Secondly, God still spares some to bring them to repentance, that they may turn out of the crooked into the straight path. Let me advise them that have tasted of God's mercy in this way never to forget it; and for this let me stir up my own soul to praise God with you. When my next neighbour was smitten dead, why was not I smitten also? It was only God's mercy. What a fearful judgment it is not to profit by afflictions. It is that for which God finds great fault with His people in Deut. xxix. 2, 3, 4. In the second place, let us labour to profit by affliction. The last clause is, "Neither can we stand before Thee, because of this." As if he had said, "We cannot come before Thee with any confidence while we be in our sins unrepented of." That man that comes before God in his sins without repentance cannot come with any confidence or hope of mercy. In Prov. xxviii. 13, mercy is promised to him that confesseth and forsaketh his sin; but wrath is pronounced against him that hideth them. (*Ibid.*)

CHAPTER X.

VERS. 1-25. Now when Ezra had prayed.—*Prayer and confession*:—The former chapter did set down the humiliation of Ezra; this demonstrates the fruit and effect that it produced. When the people saw that he was so affected and afflicted, and that not so much for his own sins as for the sins of the people, they take it to heart. And first, there is a very great assembly gathered together; secondly, they weep sore; thirdly, one particular person, Shechaniah by name, confesseth the sins of the people; fourthly, they conceive hope of remission; fifthly, they resolve to put away their strange wives; lastly, they put their late resolution into execution. That which gives occasion to all these is laid down in the first words of the chapter, which contains: First, the actions of Ezra, and they be two, "praying and weeping." Secondly, his manner of confessing, "he cast himself down before the house of the Lord." Upon this follows the coming together of a great assembly of men, women, and children. We begin with his actions, and first for his praying, "When Ezra had prayed." The commandment of God is for it (Psa. l. 15), "Call upon Me in the day of trouble." So in James v. 13, "Is any among you afflicted? let him pray." And as God commanded it, so His children have practised it. First, pray sensibly. Be sensible of what thou sufferest. God loves not that men should be as so many Stoics. Secondly, a man must pray as feelingly as fervently (Jam. v. 15). Thirdly, we must pray faithfully, that is, believing we shall receive what we implore God. Fourthly, we must pray constantly. First, we must aim at the glory of God in all the prayers we make. Secondly, a man must so pray to God that withal he use means to accomplish his desires. So much for Ezra's first act. The second act performed by him is his confession, the text saith, "When he had confessed." I desire you to practise this second act of Ezra. Do not only pray unto God, but likewise confess your sins unto Him. First, we must confess them with shame, thus did Job (Job xlii. 6). Secondly, we must do it ingenuously. It must not be extorted from us as it was from Achan, but we must willingly confess our iniquities. Thirdly, we must do it with sorrow and contrition of soul. Fourthly, with anger. Fifthly, with honest hearts; that is, with an assured purpose to leave our impieties. Lastly, we must confess our sins fully; there must be no retaining, excusing, or extenuating of sin. We come now to the manner of Ezra's confession, laid down in these words, "Weeping, and casting himself down before the house of the Lord." The first thing in it is his weeping, and this hath ever been a usual concomitant of prayer. See it in David (Psa. vi. 6). Mark, he made his prayer to God, and tears went along with it. First, because of the great good that sin deprives us of. We are apt to grieve for the loss of a father, a wife, or a child. And shall not we mourn for sin, which deprives us of the true God? Secondly, we have reason to weep for sin, because of the miseries which it brings on the sons of men. It should exhort us to weep and mourn for our sins. We spend tears in abundance for these secular things; but we should spare them there, and spend

them here. Is it not a foolery to wash a stable with sweet water? Thy tears be the sweetest water in the world, therefore spend them on thy sins; I am sure thou canst not spend them better. The second thing in the manner is, "He cast himself down before the house of the Lord." Where repentance is true inward, it will put itself outward. Those that find not this in themselves may suspect their repentance. "He cast himself down before the house of the Lord." Why so? It was the more to stir him up to humiliation. He seems to say, "What? shall Thy people enjoy the privileges of Thy house? And shall they thus irritate and provoke Thee?" (*Ibid.*) *The influence of an eminent example*:—We come now to the firstfruit of Ezra's humiliation; and that is the convening of a great congregation to him. So that Ezra hath here the glory of being an example of goodness to others. It is to stir us all up to this holy pride, to be the first in good actions. He that did first invent printing, his name will be famous to the end of the world. So now, to be the first that believes in a town, to be the first that puts a good law in execution, to lay the first stone in a pious work, this is no small, but a very great honour. We say he is an ill horse that will not lead the way but only follow; and I will not give a button for that Christian that will do no more than he sees others do. How do ye in your affairs in the world? If a commodity come from beyond the seas of which you stand in need, do you stay till others bid money for it? No; but with all speed you get it into your own hands. And shall there be such a moderation in spiritual things? Further, as Ezra had the honour to be an example to others in goodness, so now see the effect of it, "A great company of men, women, and children assembled together." And why so? Doubtless for no other cause but to humble themselves as he had done. So efficacious and powerful is the example of goodness in great ones. It is said of Augustus that in his time Rome was full of scholars because he affected learning. In the time of Commodus it was full of fencers because he loved that exercise. And in Nero's time it was full of musicians, for he took great delight in music. All men compose their manners to his who is their governor. The truth is, the example of great ones is the loadstone which draws inferiors after it; that is the compass by which most men sail. In the second place, let it be a use to those who are eminent in the Church, such as Ezra was. Let them not only preach, but live well. Where the sin is general and epidemical, good reason that all should be joined together in humiliation. When we shall see that the sins of the times do overflow and be grown up to heaven, as at this time they are, it shall be fit, though a public humiliation be not prescribed by authority, to make our humiliation general by every man's sorrowing for his own sins. "Oh," say those in the city, "those of the court are so horribly wicked that we are all like to smart for their profaneness." And saith the court, "Such is the cheating of the citizens, that they will draw down judgments upon us all." Thus one accuses another; but in the meantime, who smites his hand on his breast and saith, "What have I done?" But mark the particular numeration which the Spirit of God makes, "men, women, children." First, men; and good reason men should lead the dance and go before the rest in a good way. Abraham went first out of his country, and Sarah followed him. I press it no further than thus: you that are men, I confess you have more honour put upon you than women have, and I know you are apt enough to arrogate as much to yourselves; but take heed that whilst you go before them in honour that they prevent you not in the best things. The second sort of people spoken of are women, and indeed the service of God is charged upon them as well as upon men, as in 1 Tim. ii. 10, 15; 1 Pet. iii. 4. Thirdly, "the children came." What? the children join in humiliation? Yes; why not? for God was offended, and they had reason to be humbled for it. The second thing set down in this verse is "that the people wept very sore." What was the reason? The reason shall be the observation. Great sins must have a great measure of sorrow. In Psa. vi. 6, David having committed great sins, "made his bed to swim, and watered his couch with his tears." "Sin must have sorrow at one time or another" (Prov. xxix. 6). (*Ibid.*) *Helping the minister*:—What comfort it pleaseth God to give his ministers here in that happy fruit of people's humiliation. So great is the comfort of this kind that there cannot be a greater. I do not think but at this very time the tears stood in Ezra's eyes; yet when he saw tears distill from the people's eyes it made him glad at the heart. Ministers know that if great persons be won to God they will win others by their example—so powerful is the example of great ones to inferiors. It should teach the ministers of the Word, like Ezra, to labour the conversion of great and eminent persons, and to do what they can to bring them to sorrow for their sins. How comfortable it is in good actions

to have an assistant. Is it not lamentable that men should get good business on foot and have none to join with them? It is a happy thing when the priest and magistrate, the word and the sword, go hand in hand together. There will be no reformation till the word of Ezra and the sword of Shechaniah go together. But now what is it which Shechaniah saith? He speaketh that in a few words, which Ezra had delivered more largely, "We have trespassed against our God." The penitent soul is more severe against itself than the most slanderous tongue in the world. But I pass by that and fall upon another observation, which naturally springs from Shechaniah's words, and it is this: Above all other griefs, this to a good soul is the chiefest, "that he hath offended God." (*Ibid.*) *Forgiveness for great sins*:—We descend now to another fruit of Ezra: his humiliation. Shechaniah confesseth the sin of the people, which was of the first magnitude; to wit, their joining themselves in marriage with heathens. Yet he despairs not of forgiveness from God, but saith, "Yet there is hope in Israel concerning this thing." From whence I ground this observation. The greatness of a sin, if there be repentance, is no impediment to the forgiveness of it. So saith Shechaniah. First, it may appear to be true by the charge that God gives men to repent (Isa. i. 16). The second reason is drawn from the examples of those great sinners on whom God hath showed mercy. The third reason is drawn from the attributes of God. (*Ibid.*) *Covenanting with God*:—Shechaniah is not only resolved to do as he saith, but he is willing to make a covenant with God, both in his own and the people's behalf. The true penitent is desirous to tie himself by all possible bonds to keep that which God commands. Mark it in some proofs. First, the child of God knows that the service of God is a matter of special consequence. He knows it is as much as the salvation of his soul, and therefore he conceives he cannot perform it too strictly. Secondly, there is a desire in God's child to show how willing he is to obey God. One meets with those which are afraid of these bonds. There be those that will not come to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper because, they say, it is a sacred thing; and if they come there they must enter into a solemn covenant with God. I cannot but mourn for this, that they are afraid to tie themselves to God. In the second place, let us ever be willing to be tied to God as close as may be. Yea, if we know any way in the world to tie ourselves faster to Him, let us put it in practice. Now we are to examine the matter of this covenant. First, it was "to put away their strange wives." Beyond doubt this to flesh and blood was a hard and grievous thing. When the soul is truly penitent, whatsoever it be that is pleasing to a man, if it displease God he will forego it. It serves to stir us up to this hard task. I call it a hard task because a man will be content to part with many sins rather than he will leave his beloved corruption. As it is in flaying a skin of a dead body, it comes off with ease till ye come to the dead, but there it sticks and comes not off without difficulty. Come to the covetous man, and he will easily be persuaded to avoid prodigality. Here you shall find him as tractable as may be, but yet all that you can say or do shall not work upon him to forsake his covetousness. Secondly, they put away the children born of them. What was the cause of this? Carthusian gives the reason, and it is a very good one, which will yield us the ground of an observation. Saith he, "They cast out the children with their mothers, lest the wives having left their children behind them should take occasion to return again to fetch them. He that would avoid sin must make conscience of avoiding all the occasions of sin. For proof hereof see that place (Gen. xxxix. 10). Joseph was so resolute in goodness that he not only repels his mistress her unlawful request; but, saith the text, "Though she spake to him day by day, yet he hearkened not unto her to lie with her or to be with her." First, if it be a sin that a man hath repented of before, then he must be so much the more careful to avoid not only the sin itself, but all occasions tending to it. Secondly, if it be an evil that a man was never engaged in before, yet he must avoid the occasion, for there is great need that our prayers strengthen our works, and that our works give vigour to our prayers. Nothing is truer than that proverb, "Occasion makes a thief." If therefore we desire to overcome our lusts, let us avoid all the occasions of sin, which are as so many pandars waiting upon it. As for example, thou art an excessive person, and wouldst conquer that sin. First, get a hatred to this sin; secondly, avoid all occasions which tend this way: sit not long at wine, and beware of idleness and ill company. Thou art a contentious person, and desirest strength against that sin. Take heed of heat in holding arguments with others. Well, when Shechaniah and the rest had done this, what rule will they then walk by? "According to the counsel of my lord." Now, if it were so that Shechaniah, who

was a prince, thus said to Ezra the priest, take knowledge, then, of this much : what respect in times past was given to those whom God called to serve Him, as to be His priests ! It is to be deplored in these days, when every base fellow thinks himself better than the minister. (*Ibid.*) *Trembling at the Word of God* :—It should seem that there were others besides Ezra which advised the people to put away their strange wives, and they such as are said to tremble at the Word of God. And here observe the power of God's Word. The power of God's Word is such that it makes men tremble. To prove this look at Jer. xxiii. 29. Let us labour for this holy disposition of soul to tremble at God's Word. A man that hath been exercised with the terrors of God, such a man is most fit to advise and counsel others. A man that knows a country by the map may be able to speak something of it, but it is nothing in comparison of what a traveller can say which hath been there. So a man that hath never felt the terrors of God may be able in part to advise and comfort those in such distresses ; but not like him that hath been exercised with the same terror. Let it teach those that be teachers of others to lay things to their own hearts, and to make trial of them there before they prescribe them to others. Wilt thou teach the people how to conquer such a lust ? Hast thou made trial of it thyself ? But I go another way, and think that by those who trembled at God's Word is meant such as had not been engaged in that common abomination of marrying strange wives ; and if so, I cannot but note this much : When the times are most wicked God reserves some to Himself. Secondly, let us labour to keep ourselves from the corruptions of the times. When all others do that which is evil, do it not then. And that thou mayest do so, remember these things : First, David makes it a blessed thing not to walk in the way of sinners (Psa. i. 1). Secondly, the purity of a man's religion stands in this, "to keep himself unspotted of the world" (Jas. i. 27). Thirdly, remember for what end Christ died. He gave Himself for our sins, "that He might deliver us from this present evil world" (Gal. i. 4). Fourthly, I would have a man to consider what a glory it is to God when he is good amidst a froward generation, to be as fish which retains its freshness in the salt sea : Fifthly, mark what a confusion it is to Satan when a man goes on in a good way where most men go wrong. Lastly, if we sort ourselves with the sinners of the time we hinder the conversion of the world. Whereas, when a man shall shun such a wicked man's company, he will begin to say with himself, "Surely such a man sees something amiss in me, which makes him refrain my society." And by this means he may be reclaimed. The fear of God is the restraint of all sin. This is proved sufficiently (Prov. xvi. 6). That man is most fit to advise others who is not engaged in the same transgression. The hand that must wash a thing clean, except it be clean will add to its pollution. (*Ibid.*) *The reformation proposed* :—I. THE IMPRESSION WHICH EZRA'S CONDITION AND CONDUCT BY REASON OF THEIR SIN PRODUCED UPON THE PEOPLE WAS—1. Sympathetic. 2. Deep. II. THE PROPOSAL OF REFORMATION MADE. III. THE PROPOSAL OF REFORMATION ACCEPTED. Learn—1. The manifestation of intense feeling is sometimes commendable, and very influential for good. 2. A deep feeling of the guilt of sin is a strong encouragement to hope for forgiveness, amendment, &c. (ver. 2). 3. That repentance only is genuine which leads to restitution and reformation (ver. 3). 4. It is of the utmost importance to translate religious feeling into corresponding action without delay. 5. Great leaders may receive valuable aid from even their humblest followers. 6. It is sometimes wise to fortify good resolutions by a solemn covenant with God, or by a serious pledge to men. (*William Jones.*) *Arise ; for this matter belongeth unto thee : we also will be with thee.*—*True loyalty* :—True loyalty is marked—1. BY GENUINE RESPECT. In the commonwealth of Israel at that moment there was great need of reform. The people had not long returned from captivity. They were powerless and few. Yet the very evil which had previously occasioned their captivity had begun to reappear. Steps had been taken which if not retraced would certainly bring that evil about. Many in high places—some of the speaker's own relatives—were in fault (ver. 26). The matter therefore was pressing. He felt it so. He desired reform very earnestly ; he recommended it very strongly (vers. 2, 3). Yet he would not take it upon him to be the first to move in this matter. He would not set aside those whose office it was to do this. "Arise ; for this matter belongeth unto thee." You see exactly the state of his mind. Notwithstanding the depth of his zeal and convictions, he would sooner do nothing than be disrespectful to Ezra. No change, in his judgment, would be proper reform that should set proper authority on one side. II. BY SINCERE SYMPATHY. This is shown here in the words that come next : "We will also be with thee : be of good courage and do it."

It is possible to defer to authority in a cold and unfriendly spirit, to leave too much on the hands of our rulers, and to fail in taking our proper share of odium in supporting them and their measures. If we wish to be truly loyal we are bound to encourage them openly in their righteous efforts. We are bound also to promise them our support and assistance. We may apply these lessons—1. To the laws of our land. Except where religious principle is in question, these should be the laws of our lives. It is the object of the “criminal classes” to try to evade them. It should be the object of God-fearing persons to try and observe them. “Render unto Cæsar the things which are Cæsar’s” (Matt. xxii. 21; Rom. xiii. 1, 2, 7). All this should be regarded by us as part of our duty towards God. This also should be applied by us carefully to all the points it embraces; e.g., our income-tax returns; our action towards contraband trade; our respect for the administrators of justice; our support of its officers, and so on. A bad citizen will never make a good Christian. 2. To the laws and officers of our Church. Ezra was acting here ecclesiastically as much as politically; of the two, perhaps, rather more so. In all things in regard to which a Church hath power to ordain, in all matters where its ministers have a right to be consulted, let us not only acquiesce, but encourage; not only encourage, but support. The English word “leader” signifies both a commander and a guide. Therefore never be many steps behind your Leader; never be one step in front. (*W. S. Lewis, M.A.*) *Pastor and Church*:—Three general remarks—I. THAT THE CHRISTIAN MINISTER IS THE CHIEF INSTRUMENT IN THE MORAL RENOVATION OF SOCIETY. Four things show this. 1. He is originally endowed with powers which specially qualify him for his work. 2. He has been educated for his high vocation. 3. He has more time than others for such an end. 4. It is to the Christian minister that the world looks for moral and spiritual help. II. THAT THE TRUE CHURCH GLADLY CO-OPERATES WITH THE MINISTER IN HIS NOBLE AIM. The Church can co-operate with him—1. By showing him practical sympathy. 2. By working out his plans. 3. By praying for him. III. THAT THE CO-OPERATION OF THE CHURCH IS A SOURCE OF JOY AND ENCOURAGEMENT TO THE MINISTER. 1. Co-operation is indicative of the spiritual health of the Church. 2. It shows that the Church appreciates the minister’s exertions. 3. Co-operation is a necessary condition of success. (*Homilist.*)

Vers. 9. Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin.—*A great and troubled assembly*:—The text teaches—I. THAT IT IS THE TENDENCY OF SIN TO PRODUCE SORROW AND CONSTERNATION OF SOUL. There is a scorpion sin in remembered guilt when outward troubles and inward fears meet together (Gen. xlii. 21). II. THAT GOD MARKS WITH PECULIAR INTEREST THE TIME IN WHICH REPENTANCE UNTO LIFE BEGINS IN THE SOUL. III. THAT REPENTANCE WHEN IT IS REAL WILL BRING FORTH ITS APPROPRIATE FRUITS. IV. THAT THE NAMES AND PERSONS OF GENUINE PENITENTS ARE FOR EVER PRECIOUS TO GOD AND RECORDED IN HIS BOOK. (*Samuel Thodey.*)

Vers. 13-17. But the people are many.—*The reformation effected*:—I. NOTWITHSTANDING DIFFICULTIES. 1. The greatness of the undertaking. 2. The inclemency of the weather. Learn: To eradicate sin is a task of the greatest difficulty. II. NOTWITHSTANDING OPPOSITION (ver. 15). In effecting any great reformation opposition is to be expected. III. WITH EXEMPLARY WISDOM AND FAIRNESS. 1. By the proper authorities. 2. With competent and reliable witnesses. 3. In the presence of the accused. 4. With due regard for the convenience of the people. 5. With careful inquiry. Learn: The importance of combining prudence of method with earnestness of purpose in carrying out great reformations. IV. THOROUGHLY. Learn: The importance of making an end of sin when we are battling with it. (*William Jones.*) *Postponed reparations*:—These people, called upon to do justice, to confess, to go and begin a new life, said, “Certainly: only let the rain get over, and you will find us pious enough; in the meantime we cannot turn the heathen wives out of doors.” How pitiable, how conspicuously human! They said in effect, “We cannot go out in the rain to settle this matter—we are not able to stand without”—we are without shelter, protection, and thou seest how the rain is coming down in cataracts: we are not trifling with the covenant, we respect it in every syllable and every letter, and it shall certainly all be carried out: but let the weather clear up!” Treacherous conscience, treacherous reason! How can a man go over a muddy road to repair an injustice he has done! Let the scavenger come first, let the highway be clean for his dainty feet; then when all is dry as summer dust, and

that summer dust has been well laid by watering-cart, my lord will cross the road. But my lord is too late. The life on which the injustice was inflicted is dead. How full is the heart of these postponed reparations! How much we are going to do when the clouds break and the sun comes back again! When the commercial sun returns cloudlessly, then we will pay up our arrears and discharge our obligations; we shall then be able to go out with some comfort, and then we shall return in the evening with a new song and a secret joy. You will not do so. If you cannot face the weather, you cannot face a grand moral obligation. You are paltering with yourselves, you are killing your conscience. Every day's delay means disqualification for the thing that is to be done. Send away the evil though it should be drenched with rain! (J. Parker, D.D.) *Delay is unwise in moral reformation* :—The longer you keep a sin in your heart the more it gets hold of you; its fangs are getting deeper and deeper. Thus men would deal with all manner of problems, whether they be personal problems, or social problems, or imperial questions. Men are very anxious not to make vital reforms speedily. They do not want to guillotine their crimes. Let those crimes be slowly poisoned; let our sins die a lingering death. The drunkard says he is going to reform, but if you were to take away the intoxicating poison from him all at once he would go mad. He is going to slope his way gradually down into sobriety; he is going to drink himself into teetotalism. "This thing," saith he, "cannot be done in a day or two; why be unreasonable about it?" It is very wonderful what our prison discipline does in this matter. A man is caught in the very act of intoxication, and for six months he sees no more of intoxicating drink, and yet he does not go mad. What can be said to such poor innocents as Judah and Benjamin and Israel when they say, "We have taken a covenant, and we are going to do all that we have confessed and promised; only the weather is so atrociously bad and the great problem is so complicated and far-stretching that it cannot be done in a day or two"? There are thousands of people involved in this same thing, who say, "Give us time!" Not an hour should be given. The reformation should be begun now. There are some things you cannot make right little by little. In the first instance you should make the covenant so binding that you will not touch the evil thing again, and then you must little by little work your way into greater and greater strength. No wise teacher will contend that the strength will come in sufficient adequateness all at once: but the step first taken must be positive and irreversible; then the after-progress may be wisely slow. (*Ibid.*) **And it is a time of much rain.**—A time of much rain :—The rain to which the text refers fell, it is supposed, in December, the coldest and most rainy month in Palestine. It came at an important juncture, when work requiring fine weather had to be done. Ezra has arrived in Jerusalem. He has come full of patriotism, clothed with authority, with vast treasures for the temple from the Persian court. He has come fired with zeal for the honour of God, determined to do his utmost for the restoration of city, temple, and reformation of life. He soon learns that the people need something more important than gold and silver, or a magnificent ritualism. Their morals had been corrupted through their marriage alliances with the heathen. A convocation was summoned, when it was resolved that there should be a dissolution of all marriage relations that were contrary to the law of the land; but so heavy was the rain that fell, that the people trembled for fear, as though the judgment of a second flood had broken in upon them on account of their sins. Israel could not forget that rain; nor will the rain of the present year (1880, a year of much rain) be easily forgotten. Many are looking at it in the light of science, some in the light of agriculture, others are looking at it in the light of commerce, but let us look at it in the light of Revelation. There is a Divine meaning in all things. Every drop of rain is full of God's purpose.

I. A TIME OF MUCH RAIN TEACHES US OUR DEPENDENCE. 1. It shows us there can be no harvests unless God permit. The farmer may plough and sow, his land may be most fertile, the seed of the best kind, cultivation perfect; but if God forbid His sun from shining, and command the clouds to pour down an over-abundance of rain, day by day, for months, the hopes of harvest will be blasted. 2. A time of great rain reminds us that our commerce is at the Divine disposal. A bad harvest cannot fail to lessen the wealth of a country and seriously affect its merchandise. 3. A time of much rain shows our dependence in many ways. You need change of air, and set out on a journey, but the benefit you seek depends on the weather which God will give; or you resolve to go to a distant town for the transaction of important business, you appoint the hour when you will be there to meet a person concerned in the transaction. But if it please God that at that very

time there shall be much rain, your friend may fail to come, your plans may miscarry, your health may suffer, and your life may be imperilled through the inclemency of the weather. "Go to now, ye that say," &c. The law of dependence is stamped on all things. Every atom is dependent on atom, man on man, nation on nation, world on world, and all are dependent on God. 4. This time of much rain makes us feel, as Englishmen, that we are exceedingly dependent on other nations. What a dismal future would be before England to-day if she could not draw supplies of corn from foreign markets. II. THAT A TIME OF MUCH RAIN IS VERY TRYING. 1. To patience. Have we stood the trial? Have we murmured? Have we said, "This is not right? A season so wet is not what we want; it is not what we have a right to expect." If so, we have forgotten that the spiritual life requires trial. A flower may come to perfection in one summer, but the tree that is to bear fruit requires not only the summer's sun, but the rain and storms of many a winter. 2. To faith. It tried the faith of the Hebrews in the time of Ezra. It led to a temporary loss of faith in the goodness of God, for they trembled, thinking that the rain was a sign of His displeasure. But the faith of some people seems to be tried in relation to the Divine justice as well as goodness. Nay, they are tempted to question the very existence of God and to regard the world as an orphan, abandoned to fate or stern law. They see the great machine of nature, but see not the personality that lives behind and through the whole. What a reproof does the wise economy of nature under which rain descends minister to such unbelief. But for the water that rises from the sea in clouds, and falls in showers on the earth, vegetable, animal, and human life could not exist. It is wisely ordained that in an island like ours, that is becoming so thickly populated and the large towns of which require at times more than an ordinary cleansing, that the average fall of rain should be maintained, not year by year, but by the overplus of one period making up for the deficiency of another. Sir Charles Lyell was on the continent when he said to a gentleman sitting next to him at table: "I fear the rains have been doing a great deal of mischief." "I should think," replied his companion, "they were much needed to replenish the springs after this year of drought." "I immediately felt," says Sir Charles Lyell, "I had made an idle and thoughtless speech." III. THAT A TIME OF MUCH RAIN SHOULD LEAD TO PRAYER. Whatever some may say against the propriety of prayer for temporal blessings, there is in human nature an instinct that bids it ask for the Divine interposition in all seasons of distress. Surely prayer in relation to rain is as reasonable to-day as when Elijah prayed that there might be no rain; "and it rained not on the earth for the space of three years and six months." (*F. Fox Thomas.*) *A wet harvest*:—It has been with us a time of much rain. And yet the present occasion suggests—I. THANKFULNESS. We are here to thank God, and we do well. If we cannot thank God for giving us a harvest at all, we are unworthy of being called His sons. What we ought to ask ourselves is this: When times were good and the seasons good, how did we show our gratitude? Did we show it by our lives? For if we only show it by eating or drinking more or in rude merry-making we can hardly wonder that we should not always be likewise blessed. Are there not some of us always ready to complain, seldom ready to give thanks? like the farmer in Cheshire that two boys went to see. The season had been particularly good. "I wonder what he'll find to complain of now," they said as they passed along. "Well, farmer," they cried out, "you have had a capital season." The farmer's brow clouded as he pointed indignantly to a little patch of beans. "Look at those beans," he said. Some of you are ready to complain of the swollen rivers, the sheets of water in the fields, the damaged crops, and the deluged gardens. But I would ask you to remember what we have escaped as well as what we have suffered. Only a few weeks ago men were trembling at the approach of the cholera, but through mercy we have escaped it. If we cannot thank God for His mercy we are unworthy of the Christian name. II. AMENDMENT. What were the people about in the days of Ezra when they trembled for the great rain? They were about to set their houses in order to have done with the ways of sin. The time of careless sin was to give place to the day of Reformation. If it could only be the same with some soul in this church to-night! The harvest brings you to think of the day when God shall look over His fields, and gather the good grain into His barns and cast the bad away. These bad years and these floods of rain will not be wasted on you if they shall turn your thoughts from the good things of earth to the better things of heaven—if habits of careless sensuality give place to the fear of God. (*W. R. Hutton, M.A.*) Neither is this a work of one day or two.—*Perseverance*:—I take this word as a

motto of encouragement to all beginning or baffled by the hardships of the Christian life. I. PERSEVERANCE IS THE SECRET OF EVERY SUCCESSFUL LIFE AND WORK. Walk through the streets of our city. Who are its prosperous men? Many who began in a low estate, all their wealth then but two willing hands, a clear head, a determined will. How has the change come about? Perseverance has done it. They have reached their position by no sudden flight. They plodded on. Rung by rung they crept up the ladder. Step by step they climbed the mountain. Difficulties have been wrestled with and beaten down. It has been hard work. Not a work of one day or two. This is universal. Look at men nationally eminent. Almost without exception what they became was owing to their own determined effort. Men are what, God helping them, they make themselves. But the journey to success in commerce, literature, the arts, the sciences, is a long one. A long journey from the first saved shilling to the millionaire's wealth; from the rude chalk profile to the famous painting on the walls of the Academy; from the first experiments to the marvellous discoveries of a Faraday; from the boy's halting verse to the "poem round and perfect as a star." The heights of prosperity are not reached at a bound. Over the clerks' desks in the office of a prosperous Christian merchant were written in prominent letters the words—a key to his own success—"Try again!" By trying again, and again, and again, men touch the top of their ambition. But "neither is this a work of one day or two." What a history of heroism is written in the turbulent pages of the great book of the deep! Think of Columbus. How splendid his day-dream of lands in the unknown West. But how difficulty after difficulty shut him in from the ocean he desired to adventure. Native Genoa was deaf to him. Venice refused to help him. The Court of Portugal deceived him. Spain at last befriended his request. And then, when out on the vast and unknown waters, his vessel rang with the cries of mutiny. But the stout heart quailed not. And, at length, the cry of "Land! land!" announced a New World given to the Old. And in our own day one of the greatest triumphs of perseverance has united by sensitive and communicating wire that New World with the Old. And was that salutary work easily accomplished? Hear the words of Cyrus Field, the captain of this bloodless and blessed victory: "It has been a long and hard struggle. Nearly thirteen years of anxious watching and ceaseless toil. Often has my heart been ready to sink. Many times when wandering in the forests of Newfoundland in the pelting rain or on the deck of ships on dark, stormy nights, alone, far from home, I have almost accused myself of madness and folly to sacrifice the peace of my family and all the hopes of life for what might prove, after all, but a dream. I have seen my companions one after another fall by my side, and feared I too might not live to see the end. And yet one hope has led me on, and I have prayed that I might not taste of death till this work was accomplished. That prayer is answered; and now beyond all acknowledgments to men is the feeling of gratitude to Almighty God." A vast and beneficent success, and "neither was that a work of one day or two." So with all great and philanthropic movements. They have sprung from a feeble beginning. They have become incarnate in some determined man. Slowly have friends gathered to his side. Obstacles have impeded them. Misrepresentations have assailed them. Still on the little band has gone. So moved John Howard in his effort to cleanse and reform prisons and prisoners. So moved Clarkson and others in their efforts to secure emancipation for every English-owned slave. So have moved Livesey and others in their effort to make England a sober land. But we must say in view of the huge obstructions and tests of philanthropic patience, "neither is this a work of one day or two." II. PERSEVERANCE IS THE NECESSITY OF SPIRITUAL LIFE AND PROSPERITY. If perseverance is needed for secular interests and temporary prosperity, who can complain if it is also needed for spiritual and eternal blessing. Evil ways have to be broken off, and that is not an easy thing. Habit in sin is tyrannic. We cannot drop a habit as we change an old garment for a new, discarding the old at once and for ever. The guilt of sin may be pardoned, but something still of its power survives. Has a man been accustomed to vice? Though a new creature, he must prayerfully and resolutely watch lest in unguarded moment he fall to the old life. Has the habit been profanity? How well must the lips be watched lest unconsciously the sinful words break forth. Has the habit been inebriety? How well the reclaimed must avoid scenes and associations with their alluring and pitiless spell, and the very beginning of the cup whose dregs are death. Has the habit been profligacy? How well must the eyes be watched lest through Eye Gate the soul be stormed and the rescued soul be

dragged down once more into "the horrible pit." And if the sin has been secret and of the soul, all the more need of vigilance. To break from sin to holiness is not an easy thing. It is possible, though difficult. Possible, "though not a work of one day or two." Who among the Bible saints were without sin? Their piety grew. Take the case of Jacob. He is an unlovely, self-seeking man when he first comes into history. But even then he had that faith by which the heart is purified. Through many years the contest went on between the baser and nobler elements of his nature. To be all that the saint ought was not easy to Jacob, but he kept on trying. And when we see him in the sunset of life before Pharaoh, on his death-bed, blessing his children, we see a man so unlike the Jacob that deceived Isaac that we scarcely know him for the same. "But that was not a work of one day or two." You have perhaps in your eye some Christian man or Christian woman that you desire to be like. You say, "If now, I could be so pure, so holy, so gentle, so useful as that one or that, then I should be happy. Well, remember that they to whom perhaps you look as spiritual models have had many years and many trials to fashion them to what they are. Then take heart about yourself. Sad indeed if you were quite content with yourself; but despair not. Paul said, "I have learnt in whatsoever state I am therewith to be content." With his circumstances, though often hard and bitter, he had learnt to be content. But with himself, never. "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect; but I follow after if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus." "But this is not a work of one day or two." Character is formed, as life is filled, with little things. Some of you may have a future of distinguished eminence in usefulness, but for the majority life will have a common cast. If we are to do any good we must utilise as they come, common occurrences and opportunities. If we are to be holy it must be in the lowly valley seen by few. And if our character is to be moulded by circumstances, it must be by trivial-seeming ones, by events that, light as gentlest chisel-touch on the marble face brings out the perfect beauty of expression that lives in the sculptor's soul! By serving God in little things we shall become liker to Him. And if He is not served in the little He will not be in the greater. Look at any man. If he is not kinder for his religion, more considerate of others, their comfort and feelings, more industrious at toil, more courteous, more patient under trial, more happy in the joy of others and more sorrowful in their sorrow, then his religion is vain. Are these small things? They are witnesses to the greatest of all—the man's renewal. By little acts we are forming habits and shaping character. "Little strokes made that ark which saved Noah." The good work is a much hindered work. We have proclivities to evil. The very spirituality of religion is a vital element of difficulty. Then how many hindrances from without? With such hindrances time is a necessity to progress. We are called to perfection. We are to be holy as Christ is holy. There is a work to be wrought in us. A work of one day or two? A work for eternity? Think of the encouragements to perseverance. Christ prays for us. He saves us from sin. He breaks its power. He marks our steps and rejoices in our progress. He loves us to the end. Because He prays, "the Spirit helpeth our infirmities" in every time of need. And because He pleads heaven will be yours at last. (G. T. Coster.)

Character improvement takes time.—The masterpieces of literature were not produced in a few weeks, nay, nor a few years. Their authors displayed an almost infinite patience before they were finished. Comparatively few authors have such patience to-day, and hence the multitude of ephemeral works. Who in these days would seriously attempt such buildings as the Pyramids? Works that last cannot be put together or run up in a few hours. A whole crop of mushrooms will spring up in a night; oaks take centuries to come to perfection. (Christian Weekly.)

Persistence required in moral reformations.—Virtue is not a mushroom that springeth up of itself in one night, when we are asleep or regard it not; but a delicate plant that groweth slowly and tenderly, needing much pains to cultivate it, much time to guard it, much time to mature it. Neither is vice a spirit that will be conjured away with a charm, slain by a single blow, or dispatched by one stab. Who, then, will be so foolish as to leave the eradicating of vice and the planting in of virtue into its place for a few years or weeks? Yet he who procrastinates his repentance and amendment grossly does so with his eyes open, he abridges the time allotted for the longest and most important work he has to perform; he is a fool. (I. Barrow.)

Vers. 18-44. And among the sons of the priests there were found that had

taken strange wives: namely, of the sons of Jeshua.—*The list of offenders*:—For what purpose is this catalogue of names inserted here? I. AS A WARNING AGAINST SIN. This catalogue shows us—1. Sin extending to all classes. 2. Sin injuring the reputation. 3. Sin corrupting the influence. II. AS AN EXAMPLE OF GENUINE REPENTANCE. 1. They confessed their sin with sorrow. 2. They offered sacrifice on account of the sin. 3. They forsook the sin. III. AS AN ENCOURAGEMENT TO GENUINE REPENTANCE. 1. Their sin was forgiven (Ezek. xxxiii. 14–16). 2. The Divine favour was vouchsafed. (*William Jones*.)

A ram of the flock for their trespass.—*Cheap expiations*:—Oh, that poor, poor ram! What a humiliation for the ram! That ram is always being killed, and cannot understand the reason why. A ram cannot save you. You might kill all the flocks that browse on the hill and still your sin would stain the centre of your heart and the palm of your hand. There are some things for which you cannot make up. There are some actions which lie beyond apology. There are some deeds which almost go beyond the large boundary of penitence. Some of us have been in danger of sinning ourselves beyond God's mercy. Beware of every method of getting out of moral obligation and moral penalty by cheap ways, by expiations that cost you nothing. Every man must have a true expiation, but the true expiation includes the offering of himself as well as the offering of the priest and the victim. It is so in the case of the Christ. He tasted death for every man; He bore my sins in His own body on the tree; yet I must be crucified with Christ. There is the difference between the true expiation and the false. The true expiation involves self-immolation; it involves fellowship with the sufferings of Christ that we may be made partakers of His resurrection. Christ being crucified for us is an aggravation of our sin if we be not crucified with Christ. Thus there is absolute loneliness in the priesthood of Christ, and thus there is a mysterious fellowship with that loneliness. There is a work which none but Christ could do, and there is a complete work which the poorest, meanest sinner has to do. The sinner does not offer Christ; if he did so that would be what we mean by a cheap or poor expiation. Christ was not offered by man; by man Christ was murdered; by God Christ was offered. Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world. The Christian expiation is not a buying off or a calculated substitution: the expiation of Christ means that we are to enter into it, in a sense share the agony. The offering is all God's, the substitution is all divine; but man is called upon to enter mystically, spiritually, and really into the offering of Christ and to be offered as it were with Christ—the sinner and the Saviour united in one sublime sacrifice. Do not imagine that you can buy yourself off by offering a ram. Do not suppose that you can make up for your sin by doubling your pew rent. Do not imagine that you can be forgiven every outrage against reason, justice, and conscience by doling out something superfluous from your own table to the hunger of the needy. Expiation touches the soul with agony, or it is a worthless offering. (*J. Parker, D.D.*)